A review of Defending Constantine

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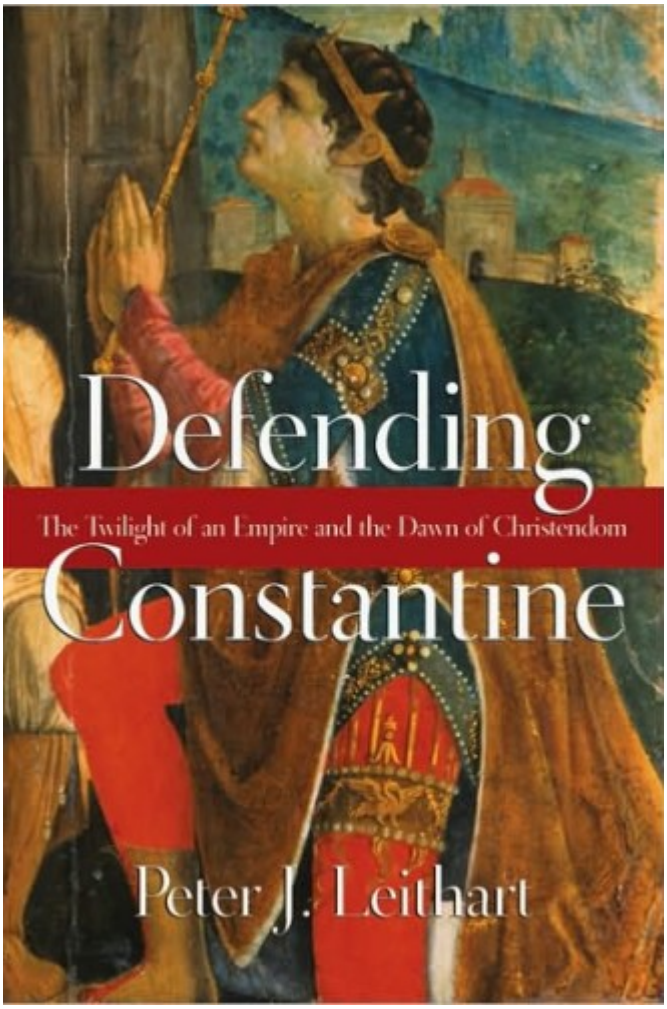
In Review



Defending Constantine

By Peter J. Leithart
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Asking me to write a review of Peter Leithart's defense of Emperor Constantine may seem like asking the fox to inspect the henhouse. My work, after all, has been

closely identified with that of John Howard Yoder and in particular with Yoder's critique of Constantinianism. Leithart, moreover, makes clear that though *Defending Constantine* is a biography of Constantine, his primary purpose is theological—he has written his book in defense of Constantine and to provide a critique of the work of Yoder. Not exactly a project designed to warm this theologian's heart.

But I think Leithart has written an important book that does more than help us to better understand the complex human being who bore the name Constantine. More significantly, Leithart's criticisms of Yoder's account of Constantinianism is one that Yoder would have appreciated and taken seriously. For unlike many who criticize Yoder, Leithart has actually read him appreciatively. He understands that even if Yoder does not get the "historical Constantine" right, that does not mean Yoder's case against Constantinianism is mistaken. The history matters, Leithart makes clear, but *how* it matters is finally a theological question.

Leithart has done his historical homework. As far as I can judge, he uses the best scholarship available to develop an engaging biography of Constantine as emperor and human being. To make a long story short, Leithart argues convincingly that Constantine was a real Christian; that the significance of his vision of the cross before his victory at Rome is confirmed by his subsequent action; that though he was not a subtle theologian, he was convinced that the Christian God is the heavenly Judge who opposes those who oppose him; and that Constantine's interventions at Nicaea were appropriate and substantial. Leithart acknowledges that Constantine's Christianity did not qualify his war-making proclivities, nor did it make him less a Roman politician who, when necessary, was ready to execute those close to him. Nonetheless, Leithart makes the case that Constantine was a much more complex figure than the stereotypes suggest.

I will leave it to the historians to evaluate Leithart's account of Constantine, not only because I am not competent to judge his work as a historian, but because I am primarily interested in Leithart's primary interest—which is to provide a critique of Yoder in the hope that Christians will recognize that they have a more robust political theology than Yoder could provide.

For Yoder, Leithart recognizes, Constantinianism is a placeholder for the transformation of Christianity from a minority faith that required courage of its adherents into a faith so politically and socially established that it was assumed that everyone was a Christian. This had profound implications for how Christians

understood the status of their moral claims because once it was assumed that everyone was Christian, then Christian moral judgments could be justified on grounds available to anyone.

Leithart rightly sees that from Yoder's perspective, this transformation had ecclesial implications. Prior to Constantine, the church could be identified visibly by the way Christians lived—by the community necessary to sustain their way of life and, in particular, by their commitment to nonviolence. After Constantine, baptism and membership in the church could no longer be used to identify a distinct community of believers since now everyone was a Christian. This changed ecclesiology resulted in a transformation in the church's eschatological conviction that Christ had defeated the powers.

After Constantine, the fundamental tension was not between church and world, but between nature and grace. As a result, Christians now think that they are in control of history, which is now identified with the institutions that allegedly give the leverage for moving history in the right direction. Needless to say, if a season of violence is necessary for that movement, Christians now think that the use of violence can be justified.

Leithart draws on the work of Charlie Collier, a young scholar deeply sympathetic to Yoder's work, to suggest that Yoder's fundamental problem with Constantinianism has always been christological. Constantinianism is the sociological condition that makes possible the presumption that the suffering Christ, the crucified Christ, is not the last word Christians have to say before a waiting world. Constantinianism names the pretense held by some Christians that there is a truth beyond the truth that is the unsurpassable Christ.

What makes Leithart's criticism of Yoder so compelling is that he largely agrees with most of Yoder's christological convictions. Like Yoder he has no use for nature/grace schemes that can tempt one to find some deeper foundation for the Christian life than Jesus. Leithart worries, however, that Yoder comes close to suggesting that the community Jesus creates is what is unsurpassable—rather than Jesus himself. This leads Leithart to press Yoder to say more about which Christ and which community is unsurpassable. He does so because he fears that Yoder's unsurpassable crucified Christ fails to do justice to the resurrected Christ.

Leithart's primary criticism of Yoder challenges the consistency of Yoder's eschatological perspective. Leithart suggests that Yoder's anti-Constantinianism becomes a form of Constantinianism to the degree that Yoder uses the Anabaptist trope "the fall of the church" to give an account of Christian history. Leithart argues that this trope not only fails to do justice to the ambiguities of history but also betrays a master narrative that ironically is Constantinian. To suggest that with Constantine things went to hell in a handbasket reveals the presumption that we are in control of history. Now that, as we say in the theological business, is interesting.

I think Leithart is right. It is not only that Yoder's account of Augustine (as Collier shows) is inadequate. Nor is it simply, as Leithart argues (again drawing on the work of a young scholar deeply influenced by Yoder, Alex Sider), that Yoder relied on outdated accounts of the patristic period. Rather, Leithart's fundamental criticism of Yoder is that he betrayed his own best insights when he denied the possibility that by God's grace emperors (or whoever is the functional equivalent, such as "the people") might receive a vision sufficient to make them Christian. That is a point that I think Yoder would find worth considering.

In fact, Yoder anticipated Leithart's criticism, often arguing that an anti-Constantinian stance too easily becomes the mirror image of that which it is opposing—thus his view that the alternative to Constantinianism is not anti-Constantinianism but locality. By locality he meant that Christians should attend to meeting the needs of their neighbors without presuming that because of such behavior we are on the cusp of history. Yoder also encouraged Christians to believe that emperors could be Christians. He observed that if they tried to rule as Christian, it might result in an earlier death than they had anticipated—but, he observed, most emperors die early anyway.

Of course, at the heart of Leithart's critique of Yoder is the question of nonviolence. In particular, he thinks Yoder's account of the pacifism of the early church is not sustainable. Yet he acknowledges that much of what Yoder says about pacifism is right. Leithart thinks Yoder is right to suggest that the church is a polity in its own right and that, therefore, it does not need to "find the stockpile of worldly weapons" in order to carry out its mission in the world. Yoder also rightly thinks that the question of pacifism cannot be determined by appeal to specific texts, but requires attention to the full sweep of the biblical witness. Leithart does not think the biblical witness entails a pacifist position. It is not clear to me that he gets Yoder right on this point. He clearly sees that the cross is at the heart of Yoder's understanding of

nonviolence, but he does not pay sufficient attention to how Yoder's understanding of the cross makes precarious the peace that the church must embody, as Chris Huebner has argued.

Leithart does not think his disavowal of pacifism means he has to reject Yoder's contention that Jesus has a politics. In order to defend his own understanding of the politics of Jesus, he introduces a theme I can only hope he will develop in the future: his defense of Constantine turns on his claim that as a Christian, Constantine ended the Roman sacrificial system. Accordingly Constantine "desacrificed" the Roman political order because he understood that Jesus was the end of sacrifice. The church, for Augustine, is the embodiment of Christ's sacrifice, and this creates a new political reality necessary to keep the state appropriately modest.

Leithart seems to be of two minds about the implications of this for understanding our current political alternatives. He observes that America is not a sacrificial polity and that "we have Constantine to thank for that," but he also claims that because the modern state, now shaped by the nihilism of modern politics, refuses to welcome the church as the model city necessary for judgment, it has again become a sacrificial state. Yoder could not have said it better. In fact, in some of Yoder's last work he sounded very much like Leithart on sacrifice as he sought to remind us that one of the realities that sacrifice names is war.

As a pacifist I could not want a better conversation partner than Peter Leithart. God is good.