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Into the Hands of Christian Princes

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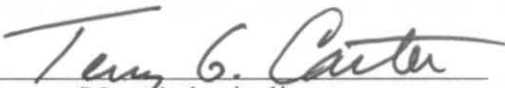
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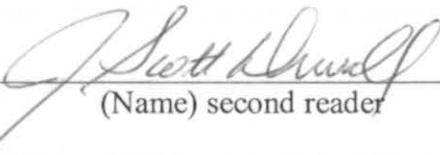
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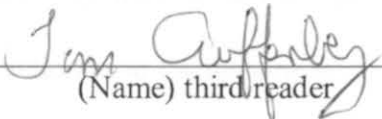
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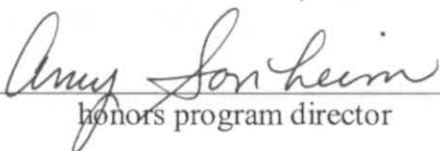
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The Purpose of a Patristic Study

In 313 C.E., Constantine I and Licinius, co-augusti of the Roman empire, issued an edict of toleration for all religions, legalizing Christianity and ending the last great persecution of the early church. This event is seen by most, and rightfully so, as being of inestimable significance in the development of the church. The question has been raised, however, and this also rightfully so, about the dangers of Constantine's caesaropapism and the blurring of distinction between Christian and State polity. Has the effect of this event been to take one step forward and two steps back? How has Christianity been affected by this union? Is it better, like the Anabaptists and their fellows, the Mennonites and Amish, to have no part in political life whatsoever, and to reject from communion those who do? Or are we rather to follow the example of many American churches (the early Puritan church serves as a valuable example here) and embrace the government and accept the role of the church as ministering through the State, a unity that detracts from neither and is of benefit to the purpose of both the heavenly and earthly kingdoms?

These questions have been of great significance to the church throughout its history. From 313 even to present day Christians have struggled with the question of what to do if afforded the opportunity to take a position of political authority. The Scriptural witness does not speak directly to this issue, and so Christians are left with few passages with which to work. This leaves American Christians living in a democratic republic with a difficult situation, we have no explicit Scriptural instruction as to the responsibility of Christian politicians and no examples of any repute to look to before 313 C.E.

It is possible that there were Christian rulers before this time. Indeed, tradition suggests that Agbar V, king of Edessa (a city-state in modern day Turkey), converted to Christianity within the lifetime of Jesus himself. Though this is a dubious claim there is less question,

however, that Edessa had Christian rulers no later than the time of Julius Africanus, c.220 C.E.¹ Our knowledge of these kings is very limited, however, and they have proved insignificant to the historical debate surrounding Christian political involvement. This source is of little help in our understanding of what the early church viewed as an individual Christian's political duty.

Where then, can a solution be found? It is the purpose of this paper to examine the witnesses of the early Christian Fathers, beginning with the Ante-Nicene Fathers who immediately succeed the Canonical writers and continuing through to the Fathers who wrote during and after Constantine's reign in the fourth century. This examination will lend a voice to those who lived in a time less culturally and intellectually removed from the Apostles and Christ himself.

Again, it is important to reiterate that the earliest Fathers lived in a different political climate than our own and had little or no opportunity to influence the government in any substantial way, and the question of a Christian actually being involved in government affairs seems to be first addressed in Tertullian's *On Idolatry* c. 200 C.E. This means that before this time there was no question as to how a Christian should behave in a position of power. There was no reason to address this potentiality. The significant statements in the earliest church Fathers discuss not what Christians should do in a position of political power but instead how Christians should respond to Government authorities when they are subject to them. This too is significant because it betrays both the understanding of the early church concerning political life and the church's self-understanding as well.

This paper will discuss the development and growth of the relationship between the early church and the Roman state, both the relationship of individual Christians as citizens and

¹ Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 279.

subjects to political authority and Christians in positions of political power. The primary means of evaluating this relationship will be to allow the church Fathers to speak for themselves by taking relevant texts from the primary documents of the early church and discussing their views of the government and a Christian's relationship to it. The first place of examination must be the New Testament itself. While it is true that there are relatively few passages that speak directly to the issue of political life, there are a few such passages. It is important to recognize the themes in the New Testament that will be significant in the development of early Christian thought on this issue.

The New Testament

The Scriptural treatment of political authority within the New Testament is sparse. There seems to be little interest in the subject. There are, however, several themes that prove significant to later Christian thought and provide categories for this investigation. Recognizing the various ideas that were significant in early Christian thought concerning a Christian's relationship to authority will be important. A paradigm can then be constructed enabling us to understand the writings of the early church and begin thinking about political life in a fresh light.

1. A King and a Kingdom

When Jesus began preaching, his proclamation was not merely one of love and peace, nor simply of sacrifice and atonement, but of a Kingdom. "Now after John was imprisoned, Jesus went into Galilee and proclaimed the gospel of God. He said, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel!'"² It is important that the gospel of God

² Mk. 1:14-15. All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the NET.

is defined as the coming of the Kingdom. This is the message of Jesus and the early church – that the Kingdom of God is coming. This concept merits a far more complete treatment than is possible here, and indeed many books treat the subject comprehensively, but for the purpose of this paper we note that the coming Kingdom is the central message of Jesus' teachings.³

The Kingdom of God was seen as an eschatological reality that was inaugurated in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. The church participates in this future Kingdom in the present, being a sort of New Creation before the *parousia*. The church is called to be faithful witnesses by doing the work of the Kingdom as it looks forward to the completion of the Kingdom at the return of Christ.⁴ This theme of eschatological hope runs throughout the New Testament and is undoubtedly one of the central themes of early Christian teaching.

The Kingdom has one legitimate King, Jesus Christ the Lord. Recognition of Jesus as the eternal Lord is also one of the most significant tenets of early Christian belief. This belief of the early church led them to recognize the kings of the earth as simply that, of the earth. They are subservient to the eternal king in Heaven. The eschatological hope that God may be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) led early Christians to recognize the imperfect and transient authority of the present age's rulers.

We must discuss the Scriptural texts so that a foundation may be established for understanding later Christian thought. First, we will study the teaching and ministry of Jesus himself. As has already been noted, there are a multitude of references to the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's Gospel) and a full treatment of this theme remains beyond the scope of this paper. A few representative texts will be sufficient to grasp the general

³ A simple perusal of the Gospels will show this to be true, the phrase is used over 100 times!

⁴ For a more detailed treatment see, for example, Stern, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*, John Knox (Louisville, 1994).

shape of this theme. In Mt. 8:11, the Kingdom is described as universal, and allegiance to the Kingdom is not based on physical location or citizenship. "I tell you, many will come from the east and west to share the banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." Several of Jesus' parables specifically about the Kingdom of God are given in Mt. 13:31ff. These parables describe the Kingdom as starting as only a small seed or a little yeast, but growing to a great tree or causing the bread to rise. The parables describe the hiddenness of the Kingdom in the present. The whole of Mt. 13 speaks of the hidden and quiet growth of the Kingdom into a complete reality.

The theme of quiet and secret growth is coupled with a recognition of the Kingdom's place within the world. This coincides with Jesus' statement to Pilate in John 18:36. "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my servants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." The Kingdom of God is not of this world, and in this light much of the early church's writings must be understood. This other worldly Kingdom, however, is not spiritualized into a Platonic immaterialism, but is thoroughly eschatological. The hope for a future Kingdom is central in the New Testament and the early church.⁵

This theme appears not just in the Gospels but throughout the New Testament. In Acts 4:19 Peter and John, addressing the Sanhedrin, ask if it is more important to submit to the authority of a worldly power (i.e. the Sanhedrin) rather than to God. In asking this they disentangle the authority of political powers from the authority of God himself. While God appoints these rulers, he alone is truly to be followed as Lord. While secular authorities have power and dominion and must be respected, God alone is to be feared and revered.

⁵ For a fantastic treatment of the eschatological Kingdom of God's physicality, read N.T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope*.

Paul states in 1 Corinthians that the church should avoid going to court in hopes of resolving lawsuits. He argues that the church, while at present not a recognized court of law, will one day judge the world, and as such is an authority greater than the human courts (indeed, they will even judge angels). The church is an eschatological court that will rule eternally, having more lasting power and authority than any secular court (1 Cor. 6:1ff.). This indicates that the eschatological hope of the church demands obedience and radically different actions in the present. The Kingdom was to be the primary identity of the Corinthian believers. They were to behave in a manner such that the reality of the future Kingdom was visible in their own lives.

This concept is heightened in Paul's letter to the Phillipians, where Paul tells the proud citizens of Rome first to conduct themselves "as citizens"⁶ in a manner worthy of the Gospel," (1:27) and he says again in 3:20-21 that "Our citizenship is in heaven – and we also await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform these humble bodies of ours into the likeness of his glorious body by means of that power by which he is able to subject all things to himself." Here the Christian's citizenship in Heaven is again being presented to the Philippians as motivation for service to God, and Jesus is working to subject all things to himself and to transform our bodies into the likeness of his glorified body.⁷ Here again the eschatological hope is linked to the citizenship we have in a new Kingdom. Paul used these words to elicit from the Philippians a recognition of the new and more lasting citizenship in the Kingdom of God that must overshadow their citizenship on earth and subject it, along with

⁶ πολιτεύομαι is generally translated as "conduct yourselves," but literally means "behave as citizens." The modification of the text to the form quoted above is my own, though it is based on the footnotes of the same passage in the NET.

⁷ For this idea I am indebted to a sermon delivered at Lake Pointe Church in Rockwall, TX on March 29, 2009 by Ben Stuart.

everything else, to Christ the eternal king.

Paul speaks of Christ dismantling all rule, authority and power in 1 Cor. 15:24, again interestingly tied to the bodily resurrection of believers and the subjection of all things under Christ. This is clearly a significant theme in his ethical thought. The eschatological Lordship of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the subjection of all things under his eternal rule is Paul's hope for the future, the motive behind his teaching and his ministry, and must be the central motive of the church in any action taken within the present political world.

2. *The Lord of History*

The second major New Testament theme is the recognition of God as the Lord of History. Because Christians saw history from the perspective of the end, believing that they lived in the end times, they saw history as a progression toward the coming of Christ. As a result, past and present alike were seen as being under the sovereignty of the Lord of History. The story from Genesis to Revelation was seen as a unity, and each individual Christian's experience was a part of that story. As Lord of History, God appointed events and rulers, meaning that the authorities in power are to be respected as servants of God.

In Jesus' discussion with Pilate Jesus states that if God the Father had not given Pilate his authority, he would have no power to rule (John 19:11). Likewise, Paul in Rom. 13 states that Christians should submit to governing authorities as God's servants. Here arises another important idea in any discussion of Christian political thought. Christians must submit to authorities because God appoints them. This is also seen in 1 Peter 2:13ff., which calls Christians to submit to authority, but adds that civil authorities often wrongly punish and persecute those who do good. When this occurs the Christian's reward is vindication and

commendation before God if he or she endures. Patient endurance without retaliation is enjoined, citing the patient endurance of Christ in his own trial before Pilate. This passage assumes the appointment of rulers by God and goes on to enjoin the patient endurance of the saints.

3. God as Eschatological Judge

The third major theme in the New Testament relevant to political thought is that of God as eschatological judge. Since God will judge each man according to his or her actions, the persecution of rulers will be counted against them, while the disobedience of subjects will rightly be judged by God.

In revisiting 1 Peter, this time going to 4:4-6 it is made clear that God will judge the living and the dead. Those who believed and were persecuted will be justified and shown their reward. Those who persecuted them and who reviled Christ will likewise be judged for their actions.

John in Revelation has a distinct perspective in speaking about the authority in Rome. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all relevant passages in Revelation. The whole book can be seen as a polemic against the transient rule of worldly authorities that challenges the eternal rule of Christ. This includes the Roman emperors, particularly Nero or Domitian and the imperial cult. A single example is sufficient for this paper. John describes a wretched prostitute riding on a monstrous beast drinking the blood of the saints, corrupting the world with her sins and then equates these disturbing images with the authorities in Rome (17:1ff). The beast has seven heads which are equated with the seven hills of Rome (v. 9) and the prostitute is said to represent the great city (Rome) that rules over the kings of the earth (v. 18).

The image of a terrifying evil monster describing the political powers of this world expresses the situation faced by John in his composition of Revelation. The persecution of Christians in his time was intense and his response equally so, stating that the government was being perverted, becoming a servant of Satan's. It is also made clear that God's judgment will come in due time. Even when they openly oppose God and his plan, rulers remain part of God's historic order and must be respected.

Blending and Interaction of the Three Themes

These three themes are often closely connected with one another. The eschatological and historical cannot be separated in God's story for the world. None of the examples referenced fit completely within a single category. Consider First Peter's discussion of the just rule of authorities appointed by God in 2:13ff. and the assurance that these rulers and all persecutors will face judgment and any one condemned for Christ's sake will be exonerated in the Last Day. This encouragement of eschatological vindication comes from the same writer who recognized the appointment of these rulers earlier in his letter.

This duality is maintained throughout early Christian writing. On the one hand, government is seen as appointed by God to preserve a semblance of peace, while at the same time government serves as the primary persecutor of the church. Government is the divinely instituted authority that rules over the world, holding back anarchy and lawlessness. At the same time earthly authorities are a subversive and persecuting force in rebellion against God, challenging his authority and claiming that authority as their own. This insurrection will finally be confronted in the *parousia* of Christ. This duality of theme, of submission to the present sovereign authorities in the world as being appointed by God and the rejection of present

authorities' claims to allegiance in light of the ultimate and unqualified allegiance owed to the triumphant Christ will be revisited time and again in the writings of the church Fathers.

The Apostolic Fathers

Very few early Christian writings can be placed within the first century or early second century, contemporaneous with the writings of the New Testament. These authors, commonly called the Apostolic Fathers, are distinct from but very closely related to the writers of the New Testament. Generally, these texts were written within one generation of the composition of the New Testament and as such were often written by the disciples of the Apostles themselves. The writer of the *Didache* may have composed his work as early as the late 50s or early 60s, though it is sometimes dated in the late first century or early second century. The only other Christian writers dating from this time period are Clement of Rome, Ignatius and Polycarp. Many pseudepigraphal and mis-attributed writings that claim to date from this time period exist but these texts lack the authority of the Apostolic Fathers and some were forged outright by later generations. These falsified texts will not be discussed because no date can be conclusively attached to their composition.

Clement, apart from using the military as a metaphor for the body of Christ⁸ makes no reference whatsoever to anything associated with the government, showing that for him there is little if any concern to address the issue. The same can be said of Ignatius, whose only words about the government are that the “ten leopards,” the soldiers who bound him, “only grow worse when they are treated kindly.”⁹ Ignatius shows no concern for political affairs or of the Christian's duty to the state beyond being kind even to his persecutors. He instead focuses very seriously on church polity, particularly on unity of mind and submission to church authorities,

⁸ Clement of Rome, *First Epistle*, 37.

⁹ Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans*, 5.

along with a focus on faithful witnessing in the form of martyrdom.

Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna

Polycarp's writings offer more to those looking for discussion of early Christian relations with the government. The record of his trial helps us understand some of the assumptions in the mind of the Apostolic Fathers regarding the Lordship of Christ and its implications with regard to interaction with human authorities. The church of Smyrna's encyclical letter concerning Polycarp's martyrdom records his trial.

And the chief of police Herod, accompanied by his father Nicetes, both riding in a chariot, met him, and taking him up into the chariot, they seated themselves beside him, and endeavored to persuade him, saying, "What harm is there in saying, Lord Caesar, and in sacrificing, with the other ceremonies observed on such occasions, and so make sure of safety?" But he at first gave them no answer; and when they continued to urge him, he said, "I shall not do as you advise me." So they, having no hope of persuading him, began to speak bitter words unto him, and cast him with violence out of the chariot, insomuch that, in getting down from the carriage, he dislocated his leg by the fall...And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, the proconsul sought to persuade him to deny Christ, saying "Have respect for your old age" and other similar things, according to their custom, such as "Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists." But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, "Away with the Atheists." Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, "Swear, and I will set you at liberty, reproach Christ;" Polycarp declared, "For eighty six years I have served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" But on his persisting again and saying, "Swear by the genius of Caesar," he answered, "If you suppose vainly that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, and feign that you are ignorant who I am, hear you plainly: I am a Christian. But if you would learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing." The proconsul said, "Prevail upon the people." But Polycarp said, "As for yourself, I should have held you worthy of discourse; for we have been taught to render, as is proper, to princes and authorities appointed by God such honor as does us no harm; but as for these, I do not hold them worthy, that I should defend myself before them."¹⁰

God as Lord of History

This depiction of the Roman authorities as using cruel punishment in their attempts to persuade Polycarp is in accordance with the cruelty commonly displayed by Roman

¹⁰ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 8-10. All quotations are from the multi-volume set of the Church Fathers' writings published by Hendrickson.

jurisprudence.¹¹ This passage, while depicting the Roman authorities in a very negative light¹² is significant for other reasons as well. Polycarp states that he is called by God to give honor to those in positions of power and authority, applying the teaching of Paul in Romans 13 that rulers are appointed by God and must be respected as God's servants. Polycarp makes a clear statement following this that he is only to render to rulers such honor as is not injurious to himself. This makes explicit a seeming qualification in Romans 13 that Christians must not accept earthly rulers and betray the commands of Christ. This is a development of the theme of God as Lord of History, recognizing the ruler as being worthy of apologetic discourse without accepting their rule as unquestionable.

The Eschatological Lordship of Christ

This recognition of temporal authority is contained and circumscribed by a recognition of the eschatological Lordship of Christ. Polycarp's refusal to sacrifice and swear by the name of Caesar is motivated by this loyalty to Christ, whom he calls his king and his savior. This moving passage suggests Polycarp understood his allegiance to Christ supersedes his allegiance to any other authority. Of particular significance is his usage of the term king in describing Christ. This is a recognition of his eschatological kingship, setting him up as an ultimate authority against which the Caesar appears a petty demagogue claiming authority which is given to him by God. The image of the eighty six year-old Polycarp standing firm in the face of a jeering overcrowded stadium, waving away fiery death and looking to Heaven as he is murdered is surely a powerful witness to the early Christian dedication to the Lordship of Christ.

¹¹ For other examples, one need only look to Josephus' depiction of the crucifixions in Jerusalem during the siege of Titus (cf. *Wars*, 5.449-451).

¹² Indeed, they are portrayed in a manner that intentionally parallels this account to the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion.

The blending of these two themes is seamless in the account of Polycarp's martyrdom. The recognition of the political powers of this earth is seen as a duty even as he denies their demands on account of the duty to Christ the King. This understanding of Christian allegiance to God first and then the rulers to which one is subject is a valuable expression of early Christian political thought. Polycarp synthesizes the subservience to God's appointed rulers in Romans 13 and the stand made by Peter and John against the Sanhedrin in Acts 4.

Development of Themes in the Apostolic Fathers

With regard to the question of political authority the Apostolic Fathers have much in common with the New Testament writers. There is an overwhelming silence where politics is concerned. There are few mentions given to rulers or the duties of subjects and these are very general.

The significance of the Lordship of Christ in the early Christian understanding again must be emphasized. The underlying support for Christian submission to rulers and for Christian rejection of unjust rules is the same – Christ is Lord of all. As such it is necessary both to respect the authorities the Father has placed in power and to respect the Kingdom that Christ has inaugurated and will bring to completion in the fullness of time.

Mid to Late Second Century Fathers

The later part of the second century was a time of enormous literary growth in the church. Men like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hermas, and Clement of Alexandria wrote volumes defending and defining the faith of the Christian church. In defending their faith before emperors and against heretics these writers developed with more and more clarity the faith of the

early church in a more vast and expansive way than the early writers. While still being written to address a particular situation, the situations met by these writers required a far more broad and overarching treatment of the Christian faith, leading to far more systematic and full treatments by authors in the next century.

Hermas

The *Shepherd of Hermas* was probably written somewhere around c. 150 C.E. and was a very popular and controversial text in the early church, often quoted but equally as often maligned. The text is a series of prophetic/apocalyptic visions and ethical interpretations that covered a range of topics, including some that are pertinent to our present discussion. The first of these passages discusses the eschatological City (Heb. 13:12-14).

He says to me, "You know that you who are the servants of God dwell in a strange land; for your city is far away from this one. If, then," he continues, "you know your city in which you are to dwell, why do you here provide lands, and make expensive preparations, and accumulate dwellings and useless buildings? He who makes such preparations for this city cannot return again to his own. Oh foolish and unstable and miserable man! Do you not understand that all these things belong to another, and are under the power of another? for the lord of this city will say, 'I do not wish you to dwell in my city; but depart from this city, because you do not obey my laws.' You, therefore, although having fields and houses, and many other things, when cast out by him, what will you do with your land, and house, and other possessions which you have gathered to yourself? For the lord of this country justly says to you, 'Either obey my laws or depart from my dominion.'¹³

Allegiance to The Eschatological Kingdom of God

In this passage Hermas is told that the cares of this world weigh heavily upon the believer, but the specificity of the threat which is faced by early Christians is what is interesting in this passage. The threat of land being taken, property seized, and exile enforced by the governing authorities is a serious and realistic possibility facing early Christians. The coming

City is set in opposition to the present one, recognizing that a different law is enforced in each. This passage suggests that exile or martyrdom is the assumed fate of Christians who are faithful to the law of the heavenly city while dwelling in the earthly one. This absolute statement is both bold and harrowing, making it very difficult to avoid the idea that God's law and human laws often contradict. The eternal law of God will not brook with any double mindedness, either we will love the one and hate the other or we will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

There is another passage that describes the eschatological Kingdom and the alternative allegiance that is demanded by that Kingdom. Hermas is shown a vision of many mountains, all representing different types of people and different nations. These mountains had rocks come from them that were built up into a tower. When the tower was completed, though the stones came from mountains of various colors and qualities, the stones were all pure white. Hermas asks his guide about this and receives an answer that is a powerful statement of the mission and community of the universal church.

"Listen," he said: "these mountains are the twelve tribes, which inhabit the whole world. The Son of God, accordingly, was preached to them by the apostles." "But why are the mountains of various kinds, some having one form, and others another? Explain that to me, sir." "Listen," he answered: "these twelve tribes that inhabit the whole world are twelve nations. And they vary in prudence and understanding. As numerous, then, as are the varieties of the mountains which you saw, are also the diversities of mind and understanding among these nations. And I will explain to you the actions of each one." "First, sir," I said, "explain this: why, when the mountains are so diverse, their stones, when placed in the building, became one color, shining like those also that had ascended out of the pit." "Because," he said, "all the nations that dwell under heaven were called by hearing and believing upon the name of the Son of God. Having, therefore, received the seal, they had one understanding and one mind; and their faith became one, and their love one, and with the name they bore also the spirits of the virgins. On this account the building of the tower became of one color, bright as the sun."¹⁴

Hermas is told that the people of God from every nation have more alike with one another than with their fellow countrymen. This alternate identity of the church overcomes any other corporate entity a Christian might belong to. Thus, in Hermas' view, a Roman Christian is more closely related to a Parthian Christian than to a fellow Roman who is a non-Christian. This

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.9.17.

power to redefine identity is significant because the new identity redefines them to such an extent that they are no longer Romans, but Christians. The allegiance is total, destroying national borders and national pride; racial and national tension and hatred; creating a new unity that is eternal and lasting whereas national identity is temporal and fleeting.

Hermas' Contributions to the Political Discussions

In Hermas' writings some of the most poetic expressions of the otherness of Christ's Kingdom are found. The powerful redefinition of allegiance around theological rather than national boundaries should make Christians aware of the nationalistic tendencies of the modern world and the alternative Kingdom that calls for our undivided self. There is no room for dual-citizenship in Hermas' visions, one is not to turn back from the Kingdom of God in order to take hold of the temporal goods of the kingdoms of this world. It is clear that the alternative character of God's Kingdom often brings one into opposition with the political power of the day. Hermas suggests that there is an almost unavoidable contradiction between the fallible human laws of state and the powerful divine Law of the Kingdom. This leads to conflict and even exile or martyrdom.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr wrote two apologies in the mid second century, around 150-160 C.E. These apologies were addressed (though it is unclear whether they were ever delivered) to the emperors Antonius Pius, Marcus Aurelius, and Lucius Verus (the first apology) and to the Roman Senate (second apology). The apologies intended to persuade the emperors of the rightness of Christian belief and particularly that Christians should not be persecuted by the Empire. In the

first apology Justin lays out very clearly the Christian view of a Christian's relationship to political authorities.

And when you hear that we look for a kingdom, you suppose that we speak of a human kingdom; whereas we speak of that which is with God, as appears also from the confession of their faith made by those who are charged with being Christians, though they know that death is the punishment awarded to him who so confesses. For if we looked for a human kingdom, we should also deny our Christ, that we might not be slain; and we should strive to escape detection, that we might obtain what we expect. But since our thoughts are not fixed on the present, we are not concerned when men cut us off. And more than all other men are we your helpers and allies in promoting peace, seeing that we hold this view, that it is alike impossible for the wicked, the covetous, the conspirator, and for the virtuous, to escape the notice of God, and that each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions.¹⁵

Christ the King

The hope of a coming Kingdom of God is one of the primary indictments against Christians. This indictment is corrected by defining the Kingdom as ontologically different from the earthly Roman empire. Justin argues expertly here against the idea that Christians look for a rival Kingdom of men. Spies for a foreign kingdom would never be so quick to confess their real identity. For Christians, the confession of belonging to another Kingdom does not of necessity imply that they are enemies of the Roman state. Indeed, their belonging to another Kingdom means they are all the more truly loyal subjects, working for peace more than any other group in the Empire.

God as Eschatological Judge

Justin states that the primary reason Christians observe the laws of the state is that God will judge men on account of their lifestyle. This passage suggests that the manner in which God desires for men to live would by nature coincide with just laws. The virtuous life God requires includes, but is not equated with, the laws of Rome. By observing the lifestyle God requires one

¹⁵ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 11.

will naturally fulfill the laws of Rome and benefit those to which one is subject. The appointment of the Roman emperors is nowhere mentioned in this passage. Rather, the ethic of obedience is based on the alignment of Roman rule and divine mandate. Insofar as these two align, the Roman laws will be upheld faithfully. Insofar as they differ, the Roman laws will be excelled in righteousness by the requirements of the Gospel and the Caesars have nothing to fear from these men and women whose righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Allegiance to Christ and Military Service

At the conclusion of the First Apology, several letters are quoted in order to defend the right of Christians to live freely in the Roman Empire. These letters are almost surely spurious, but they show the view of the early church toward military service. The last letter, claiming to be written by Marcus Aurelius after his campaign in Germany in which he was hard pressed by German forces, drought, low morale, and unresponsive gods. He gathers together the Christians to punish them and they request that they might be permitted to pray for the army.

But being disregarded by them, I summoned those who among us go by the name of Christians. And having made inquiry, I discovered a great number and vast host of them, and raged against them, which was by no means becoming; for afterwards I learned their power. After this they began the battle, not by preparing weapons, nor arms, nor bugles; for such preparation is hateful to them, on account of the God they bear about in their conscience. Therefore it is probable that those whom we suppose to be atheists, have God as their ruling power entrenched in their conscience. For having cast themselves on the ground, they prayed not only for me, but also for the whole army as it stood, that they might be delivered from the present thirst and famine.¹⁶

This letter seems rather strange, as Marcus Aurelius did nothing to stop Christian persecution and Justin obtained his epithet Martyr under the reign of Aurelius. This passage does, however, indicate the common view of Christians in the mid-second century concerning military service. This tacit statement of rejection is significant, Christians were willing to pray for the army, but were not willing to take up arms and fight in the army. Allegiance to Christ's

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

Kingdom required distancing oneself from some of the workings of the worldly government, that Christians can serve those in the military, but may not themselves fight against their enemies.

Justin's Contribution to the Political Discussion

Justin holds many ideas together, what would at first seem to be conflicting is contiguous for Justin. First, the government is to be respected. Second, it is to be marginalized in the light of Christ's reign that must take the center of the stage. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with cooperation. Indeed Christians are encouraged to do so. However, there is also nothing wrong with rejecting the demands of political powers when they overstep the bounds God has put in place. The service done to God will be more of a service to the Emperors than actually following their commands could be. It benefits him far more to have holy servants in his realm than ungodly but obsequious ones.

Irenaeus

Another great second century apologist was Irenaeus, whose chief works defend orthodox Christian belief against heretical teachers popular at the time. In his *Against Heretics*, written around the year 180 C.E., he argues in great detail against the great heresies of the second century; particularly Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Valentinianism. There is amongst the various arguments against these heretical beliefs one which is of particular interest, centering around the continuity between the apocalyptic images of Daniel and Revelation (in an attempt to demonstrate to Marcionites that the God of the Old Testament is not distinct from that of the New Testament) that discuss the significance of these texts with regard to rulers and authorities.

He begins his argument, however, with a discussion of the lie Satan told in saying to Jesus as he tempted him in the desert (Mt. 4 & parallels) that all kingdoms belong to him.

As the devil lied at the beginning, so did he also in the end, when he said, "All these are delivered unto me, and to whoever I will I give them." For it is not he who has appointed the kingdoms of this world, but God; for "the heart of the king is in the hand of God." This also the Lord confirmed, when He did not do what He was tempted to by the devil; but He gave directions that tribute should be paid to the tax-gatherers for Himself and Peter; because "they are the ministers of God, serving for this very thing."

For since man, by departing from God, reached such a pitch of fury as even to look upon his brother as his enemy, and engaged without fear in every kind of restless conduct, and murder, and avarice; God imposed upon mankind the fear of man, as they did not acknowledge the fear of God, in order that, being subjected to the authority of men, and kept under restraint by their laws, they might attain to some degree of justice, and exercise mutual forbearance through dread of the sword suspended full in their view, as the apostle says: "For he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, the avenger for wrath upon him who does evil." And for this reason too, magistrates themselves, having laws as a clothing of righteousness whenever they act in a just and legitimate manner, shall not be called in question for their conduct, nor be liable to punishment. But whatsoever they do to the subversion of justice, iniquitously, and impiously, and illegally, and tyrannically, in these things shall they also perish; for the just judgment of God comes equally upon all, and in no case is defective. Earthly rule, therefore, has been appointed by God for the benefit of nations, and not by the devil, who is never at rest at all, nay, who does not love to see even nations conducting themselves after a quiet manner, so that under the fear of human rule, men may not eat each other up like fishes; but that, by means of the establishment of laws, they may keep down an excess of wickedness among the nations. And considered from this point of view, those who exact tribute from us are "God's ministers, serving for this very purpose."¹⁷

Lord of History

Irenaeus first states that the appointment of rulers is up to God and not to Satan, again emphasizing the divine appointment of rulers. In this passage a significant image of the government is given. The ruler's job is to restrain evil, so that men do not "eat each other up like fishes." This image shows the seriousness of human sinfulness as a result of the fall. Chaos reigns, there is no king who can restrain men's hearts, only their actions. The peace on earth is preserved by the threat of state violence, overwhelming private lawlessness. Anarchy is held back by the establishment and enforcement of systems of laws. But these laws themselves are only able to be enforced by the sword, force is ultimate in the earthly systems of government.

¹⁷

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.24.1-3.

Eschatological Judgment of God

Political rulers are both the chastening rod of God and the subject of God's divine judgment. There is no remittance because they are appointed to punish lawlessness, just as Babylon became the tool of God's judgment and afterwards was subjected to it. Irenaeus states that rulers who do things in the execution of their duty and in the service of justice will by no means incur God's wrath, but only those who abuse their power to pervert justice and abuse their subjects. This is an important development as well, Irenaeus is the first Christian writer to explicitly excuse violent actions if done by the proper authorities in the name of maintaining peace.

The Eschatological Lordship of Christ

Finally, Irenaeus concludes his discussion of kingdoms and the eschatological teachings of Daniel and Revelation with a summary statement of the Biblical witness as an argument against the heretical assertions concerning the Old Testament that there is a discontinuity between the God in the Old Testament and that of the New.

“...The great God showed future things by Daniel, and confirmed them by His Son; and... Christ is the stone which is cut out without hands, who shall destroy temporal kingdoms, and introduce an eternal one, which is the resurrection of the just; as he declares, ‘The God of heaven shall raise up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed’”¹⁸

The replacement of the present temporal kingdoms with the eschatological Kingdom of God is of the utmost importance to the early Christian writers. While the whole of this passage is addressed against the heresies of the Marcionites, Gnostics, and Valentinians; these reflections of Irenaeus' offer valuable insight into early Christian political thought. Even when rulers were recognized as noble and virtuous, God's appointed servants, the government was still seen as

¹⁸

Ibid., 5.26.2

merely holding back the overwhelming flood of human sinfulness, a necessary evil after the fall but part of the old creation that passes away when Christ makes all things new.

Irenaeus' Contribution to the Political Discussion

Irenaeus makes it clear that the Kingdom of God is the Christian hope, Thus while Christians submit to earthly authorities, they recognize these authorities as at best temporal dikes holding back the overflow of humanity's wickedness. One of Irenaeus' significant contributions is to make it clear that while rulers must bear the sword, they do not have freedom of operation, but are judged even as they judge. The justice or injustice of their reign will be paid back to them in full. Further, he makes the clear statement that a ruler is capable of passing judgment without incurring God's wrath. He also spells out the transient and negative role of government, that it is primarily a restraining role in the fallen world and that the Kingdom of God has the transformative role that will continue into the New Creation.

Clement of Alexandria

Clement lived in the late second century and was one of the earliest teachers in the catechetical school of Alexandria, where new Christians were instructed in the doctrine of the faith. He is a literary figure of monumental significance, and shows that a shift of the church's writings from being primarily situational and epistolary to being expositional and universally applicable had begun. The treatises of Clement are instructional and intended to cover the whole

range of human existence, from what sort of bed to sleep on¹⁹ to the similarities between Platonic and Christian teachings²⁰ and everything in between. His treatment of Christianity suggests that for him it was assumed that Christian belief reached deeply into the individual and affected every aspect of their life. His writings are conspicuously quiet where politics are concerned, but there is one passage that is significant in the political development of the church.

A New Kingdom, A New Army

Clement wrote an appeal to the Pagans encouraging them to reject the foolish and superstitious beliefs of Pagan religion and turn to Christianity. In this address he discusses the manner in which Christians fight, with prayer and not weapons of war.

The loud trumpet, when sounded, collects the soldiers, and proclaims war. And shall not Christ, breathing a strain of peace to the ends of the earth, gather together His own soldiers, the soldiers of peace? Well, by His blood, and by the word, He has gathered the bloodless host of peace, and assigned to them the kingdom of heaven. The trumpet of Christ is His Gospel. He has blown it, and we have heard. "Let us array ourselves in the armor of peace, putting on the breastplate of righteousness, and taking the shield of faith, and binding our brows with the helmet of salvation; and let us sharpen the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" So the apostle in the spirit of peace commands. These are our invulnerable weapons. Armed with these, let us face the evil one; "the fiery darts of the evil one."²¹

This passage shows two significant things. First, Christians are to be bloodless. that is, they are not to serve in the military, their fighting is of a different kind. In the *Miscellanies* There is a similar statement, that "We (Christians) do not train our women like Amazons to manliness in war; since we wish the men even to be peaceable."²² These rejections of violence are motivated by the eschatological Kingdom of God, and this is the context in which Clement writes previously. When Christ returns, he will blow the trumpet and gather to himself his

¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, Ch. 9.

²⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, 2.22.

²¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, 11.

²² Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, Book 4, Ch. 8.

soldiers of peace, those who have fought for his peaceful Kingdom and who waited in expectation for his return. Thus the rejection of military service and state violence is eschatological, Jesus' coming Kingdom has its own army, and the weapons of that army, as in Justin Martyr's Apology, are spiritual rather than physical.

Clement's Contribution to the Political Discussion

While it is true that there are several texts that betray the themes significant in Clement's thought concerning political participation, his writings are surprisingly quiet when it comes to political life. Considering that he seems to have an opinion on everything, it is altogether singular that he has nothing explicit to say concerning submission to authorities or the Christian's duty either to avoid or serve in the political power structure. That a man with an opinion on shaving and shoes has nothing to say about politics is confounding to modern readers, but Clement's focus is on personal and even bodily holiness and he has little to say about political duty. He believes it to be far more significant that he instruct new Christians in the proper and practical holiness required by God rather than to discuss political duty, showing that the Christians of this time saw a holy life as the primary focus of ethical teaching, and that holiness was manifested in self-control. There was little concern for the Christian in public life beyond the recognition that the Christian's duty to remain pure and undefiled by the world prohibited certain activities in the public sphere.

The Second Century church's Political Thought—A Review

In the second century, Christians began to develop much more clearly their views on a number of subjects. Theological, ethical, and cultural discussions became not only more common, but more in depth and more refined. In this period, a great deal was written and many advances were made. Orthodox Christian belief began to become more defined as heresies and persecution pressed harder on the church. Apologetic writings became popular and Christian teachings reached the highest worldly authorities. The organization of the faith became more concrete, with more standardized structures of clergy and more clearly defined teaching, with catechetical schools and theological treatises making the teachings of the church more accessible to any wishing to learn about it.

These great leaps forward were accompanied by many setbacks, persecution was the official Roman policy from at least the time of Trajan.²³ The writings of pagans in the second century against Christianity shows that the growth of this new sect had drawn the attention of the most cultured men in the world. Marcus Aurelius,²⁴ Galen,²⁵ and Celsus (whose writings will be reviewed more fully when Origen is discussed) all attacked Christianity as being foolish and baseless, with no reality to back up their beliefs. At the same time the Christians were being attacked by farcical plays,²⁶ and popular graffiti (such as the Alexemanos graffiti). This shows that the Christian faith was growing and that popular dislike for Christianity was likewise growing across the entire spectrum of Roman culture.

This animosity may have been due in part to the Christian refusal to honor the gods and

²³ Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 10.96-97.

²⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 11.3.

²⁵ Galen, *On The Pulse*, 2.4 & 3.3.

²⁶ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, 9.14.

the Caesars. Indeed, this seems to have been the most common rebuke of Christians, that they were atheists.²⁷ Their alleged atheism and their refusal to honor the Caesar may have made them look very anti-social, as did their refusal to serve in the military and in government positions. While the writings of the second century church Fathers only hint at these refusals, Origen's quotations of Celsus²⁸, who wrote in this time period, show that these were major points of friction between the Roman people and the Christians.²⁹

The Kingdom of God retains a central place in the political views of the second century Fathers, and the implications of this belief grow more numerous. The rejection of Caesar worship and the civil religion is a continuation from the first century. An interesting development of the idea of Christ's eschatological Lordship is the universal institutional identity of the Christian found in Hermas' writing. His idea of an identity that transcends all bounds is developed from Biblical witnesses³⁰ and expressed powerfully in Hermas' visions. His tale of two cities is also based in Biblical text, but again develops the connection to political life more explicitly. The opposition of the two cities often leads to dissent. The Christian must retain a loose connection with this world in order to be free to do what may be dangerous to the worldly vested interests of the believer.

A very interesting development is the quiet stance Clement takes against military service. Christians fight with the indestructible weapons of peace. Recall that Justin made a similar statement in the alleged letter of Marcus Aurelius he quoted (or fabricated) at the end of the First

²⁷ Recall Polycarp's alleged crime of atheism and the proconsul's demand that he swear by the genius of Caesar.

²⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 8.73-75.

²⁹ This overview of second century history, along with much of my historical data, is drawn from *Christianity and the Roman Empire* by Ralph Martin Novak.

³⁰ Note 1 Cor. 12:13, Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:11, Rev. 7:9.

Apology. This is the first expression of a rejection of Christian participation in state violence in such clear terms, but the New Testament seems to hint at pacifism as a Christian moral principle (as in Jesus' disarming Peter, or the rejoicing rather than retaliation of the Apostles when they are beaten for Christ). The charge of Celsus previously mentioned also suggests that abstaining from military service was the regular practice of Christians at this time. The motivation of Christian pacifism given in Clement's writing is significant. The Christians belong to a different army, whose battles require a different sort of weapon and whose victory is the *parousia*. The church is God's eschatological army and this army demands unflinching allegiance and discipline.

The eschatological judgment of God is Justin's motive both to obey and disobey the Roman laws. To disobey when the laws of Rome do not contradict the Law of the Gospel incurs wrath, as does obedience when that means rejection of God's law. He argues that keeping God's law naturally fulfills the law of the state. It is clear from Justin's writing that the governing authorities will likewise be judged for the extent that their laws line up with those of God's Kingdom. God's judgment is equally dispensed among all, ruler and subject, and the standard against which both will be judged is the same— the divine requirements of God's rule.

The church Fathers recognized the appointment of rulers by God and the command that they respect earthly rulers. This remains consistent in all the second century Fathers. Irenaeus writes concerning the appointment of rulers that they are God's tool to punish the lawless and as such they will not be judged for using force in administering justice. He also makes it clear that the rulers of this world are temporary. God appoints and uses them to stem the tide of lawlessness and chaos and they must be respected as God's servants. At the same time, they are to be recognized as the transient and weak human response to what can only truly be corrected by divine justice. The human systems of law are a levee holding back the flood of lawlessness.

But when the Lord returns and sets up his New Heaven and Earth and there is no longer any sea of wickedness and chaos, the useful trouble of human government will be at an end, and Christ alone will reign supreme.

The second century was a time of great development theologically. The view of the Christian's role in political life also became more clarified and focused. The rejection of military and political involvement was a witness to the seriousness of the early church's devotion to the eschatological Kingdom of God that will only grow more clear and more radical in the third century. The second century church, though opposed to worldly power, also recognized in that power the chastening hand of God. Between the ages there is still a tumult of human wickedness, and the government is appointed to hold back the overflow until Christ returns. The primary development of the second century is not to state these truths, but to begin to apply them more directly to political life. The first century church had next to nothing to say concerning political life, particularly in comparison to those who followed.

The second century was a time of development and growth— numerically and ideologically. New applications and expressions of the themes first found in the New Testament showed the young church faithful to the message of the Gospel while having to develop the Christian identity, ethic, and mission more clearly in the face of mounting persecution. A clarity in their understanding of God's other-worldly Kingdom and his purpose in history led to fruitful thinking about Christian duty both to God and worldly rulers. The growing understanding of the temporality of earthly kingdoms and the eternity of God's Kingdom makes it clear that the church's eschatological understanding shaped its political stance. The political stance of the church, aloof but respectful, recognizing both the good and bad of any form of government, was a reflection both of where the church had come from and where it was going. The Gospel of the

Kingdom remained the motive force for Christian life and witness, while the pressure of society and political authority had begun to tighten the vice on the Christian community, resulting in a growing recognition of the incompatibility of the Roman state and the Christian Kingdom.

Third Century Fathers

The third Century was a time of intense persecution and the growing church continued to develop theological clarity and a communal identity over against the Roman state. Tertullian, Origen, and Hippolytus are among the many literary powerhouses of the third century church. While the third century church is remembered through its writing, the bold action of many Christians of this time in the face of some of the most systematic and overwhelming persecutions in world history show that the beliefs of this community were not merely academic, but encompassed every area of life. In the face of the persecutions of Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian it is little surprise that the third century church Fathers are the most vocally opposed to Christian involvement in political dealings and recognized the church more and more as an alternative and separate community. Not that the Christians began to pull themselves out of the community of the world, but that the structure of the Christian community began to rival the organization of the flagging Roman empire. The more developed organization of the third century church proved to be a vital asset to the church's mission, showing it to be a viable alternate power structure to the tumult of the Roman government and eventually leading the Roman government to (at least briefly) recognize it as a valid establishment officially sanctioned by the state. Many of the emperors lasted no more than a few months and were often very poor leaders. The constant stream of civil wars and unrest made the years of the barracks emperors some of the darkest for the Roman people and the most dangerous for the easily scapegoated

Christian community. When plague broke out in Rome in the 250s it was termed the “Plague of Cyprian,” so named after a popular Christian teacher of the time, who received blame for the plague as the Jews in Medieval Europe took the blame for the Black Plague. As Tertullian stated, however, the blood of Christians is seed³¹ and the more the third century church was persecuted the stronger it seemed to grow. The third century represents some of the darkest and most triumphant days of the church. This can be seen in the triumphant and resistant tone of much of the church's writing in this time period.

However, the third century was the beginnings of toleration for Christians, as well. It seemed that after a time of intense persecution, a time of toleration would follow and the Christian community would flourish in the relative calm. Under Gallienus in about 260 C.E. the first edict of toleration for Christians was passed, returning their property and recognizing the Christian faith, finally, as a legal, state-sanctioned religion. By the year 275 C.E. the bishops of the church were so accustomed to being a recognized religion that they even asked the emperor Aurelian to aid in the enforcement of an ecclesiastical council's decision against the heretical Paul of Antioch.³² So it is clear that while the church of the third century drew a hard line against political involvement before 260, it is likewise clear that the church began to more closely ally itself with a less hostile imperial structure in the latter half of the century. The third century was one of struggle and accommodation, often one would replace the other quite quickly and the third century provides a context for the overwhelming persecution of Diocletian and then for the final accommodation under Constantine I in 313 C.E.

Tertullian

³¹ Tertullian, *Apology*, 50.

³² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.28.4-7.30.22.

Tertullian represents a new era in Christian writing. He is the first Father to write in Latin and is perhaps the most anti-cultural of all early Christian writers. Tertullian also is the most vocal of the church Fathers in opposition to a Christian's involvement in political life. To a large degree he shaped the later third century church Fathers' opinions on the subject, as well.

Tertullian was born in Carthage and lived from around 160-220 C.E. Having converted in the very late second century, he began writing in the early third century as an apologist, theologian, and moral teacher. He wrote prodigiously, and produced dozens of volumes in his lifetime. These texts proved of great significance to the later church despite his schism with the Catholic church later in life. In around 310 Tertullian became enamored with a teacher who spoke fervently about the ongoing work of the Spirit in the world. This teacher was Montanus, founder of the Montanist sect, a spiritually ecstatic and morally rigorous heretical sect. Tertullian's works have often been maligned as a result of his apostasy in later life, but his earlier works are thoroughly Catholic and are well respected among later church Fathers who were well aware of his later lapse with the Catholic faith.

His *Apology*, written shortly after his conversion to Christianity, is vitriolic and biting sarcasm with regard to Roman political and religious authority, and in it he defends the innocence of the Christians from their alleged crimes. There were three things with which Christians were charged: atheism, cannibalism (particularly of infants), and incest. Tertullian is sarcastic in his response, and openly mocks the Roman gods and heroes for doing the very things of which the Christians are accused. Passages like "Let Janus meet me with angry looks, with whichever of his faces he likes; what have you to do with me?"³³ show the fantastic sharpness of Tertullian's jabs against pagan religion and government, a natural debater and polemicist, Tertullian is the most accomplished and certainly the most entertaining apologist of his time.

³³ Tertullian, *Apology*, 28.

Tertullian discusses in detail the role of Christians in relation to political life. It is still maintained that the Christians must pray for the Caesars as being appointed by God, but at the same time, the dishonorable hubris of claiming to be deity is highlighted as a criticism against the Caesars. Almost any involvement in the workings of the government denies Christ's calling to a holy and separate life.

Rulers of This Age and The End of the Ages

Tertullian says a great deal about respecting human rulers who have been placed in power by God. As with the church Fathers who precede him, Tertullian recognizes that the rulers of this world are appointed by God's will and accomplish his purposes and must be respected as God's servants. The reign of God in history is assumed as the foundation of Tertullian's arguments. Tertullian's arguments are very significant in the development of Christian political understanding, showing both a continuity with earlier writers and an innovative boldness.

Examine then, and see if He be not the dispenser of kingdoms, who is Lord at once of the world which is ruled, and of man himself who rules; if He have not ordained the changes of dynasties, with their appointed seasons, who was before all time, and made the world a body of times; if the rise and the fall of states are not the work of Him, under whose sovereignty the human race once existed without states at all. How do you allow yourselves to fall into such error? Enough has been said in these remarks to confute the charge of treason against your religion: for we cannot be held to do harm to that which has no existence. When we are called therefore to sacrifice, we resolutely refuse, relying on the knowledge we possess, by which we are well assured of the real objects to whom these services are offered, under profaning of images and the deification of human names.³⁴

Tertullian states that there was once a Elysian time in human history (or perhaps prehistory) in which no government existed or was necessary. This gives expression to the earlier Christian hope that God will, at the end of time, restore all things to the manner of affairs

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Ibid., 26-27.

before the Fall of Adam, and that this entailed a destruction of empires, being overcome by the powerful appearance of the Son on Earth and the recreation of all things into conformity with his Kingdom. However, this eschatological and primeval hope is closely tied to the appointment of rulers by God. If God is capable in the beginning of time to create a Utopia where he is sole ruler over all, then is it not also apparent that he is over the present ruling bodies in the world, that as Lord of History, he established the ideal state long beforehand and now appoints rulers in history.

Tertullian's description of the falsified system of idolatry was popular among Christian apologists and theologians of the time. The suggestion (made explicitly elsewhere) is that the Roman pantheon was once a royal family of mortal men who were deified after death and looked upon as a family of gods rather than, as they really were, of humans who were great leaders and rulers. It is noteworthy that this suggestion also arises in the following passage, as well.

For we offer prayer for the safety of our princes to the eternal, the true, the living God, whose favor, beyond all others, they must themselves desire. They know from whom they have obtained their power; they know, as they are men, from whom they have received life itself; they are convinced that He is God alone, on whose power alone they are entirely dependent, to whom they are second, after whom they occupy the highest places. Let the emperor make war on heaven; let him lead heaven captive in his triumph; let him put guards on heaven; let him impose taxes on heaven! He cannot. Just because he is less than heaven, he is great. For he himself is His to whom heaven and every creature appertains. He gets his scepter where he first got his humanity; his power where he got the breath of life. Without ceasing, for all our emperors we offer prayer. We pray for life prolonged; for security to the empire; for protection to the imperial house; for brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest, whatever, as man or Caesar, an emperor would wish. These things I cannot ask from any but the God from whom I know I shall obtain them. Let this, good rulers, be your work: wring from us the soul, beseeching God on the emperor's behalf. Upon the truth of God, and devotion to His name, put the brand of crime. A large benevolence is enjoined upon us, even so far as to supplicate God for our enemies, and to beseech blessings on our persecutors. Who, then, are greater enemies and persecutors of Christians, than the very parties with treason against whom we are charged? The Scripture says, "Pray for kings, and rulers, and powers, that all may be peace with you." For when there is disturbance in the empire, if the commotion is felt by its other members, surely we too, though we are not thought to be given to disorder, are to be found in some place or other which the calamity affects.³⁵

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Ibid., 30-32.

In this passage Tertullian not only states, as in the previous passage, that political authorities are appointed by God, but that this ought to give them pause in claiming to be anything more than human. They must recognize their own appointment by God and his ability to remove them from power. The subjection to God's authority of all men is one of Tertullian's favorite themes in addressing political authorities. To remind them of their own mortality and in so doing to warn them against the hubris of claiming divinity, which can lead only to punishment.

Tertullian's primary desire in addressing the emperors was to remind them that they are not their own, but were appointed and created by another. This attempt to lessen their pride is made hoping that the rulers of this age will realize that they are appointed, that their position was given and may also be taken away. Tertullian wished to make it clear that Christians had many reasons to support the emperor but it is his primary purpose to make the foolishness of Roman religious pomp and the Imperial Cult more clear. There is one God and Lord over all history, even Roman emperors.

The Christians' Apolitical Kingdom

Tertullian is also strongly aware of the Christian's call to be set apart. He taught a strict life of self-control and discipline that would be rewarded by Christ at his return. This familiar theme became even more central to political thought than in the previous century, and in Tertullian's writing some of the most decisively anti-political statements of the church Fathers can be found.

“And now in fact a Christian in his (Pilate) own convictions, he sent word of Him to the reigning Caesar, who was at the time Tiberius. Yes, and the Caesars too would have believed on Christ, if

either the Caesars had not been necessary for the world, or if Christians could have been Caesars.”³⁶ With such statements as these, Tertullian argues that the Caesars are a necessary evil, that God will use them until his return to maintain order and to fulfill his purposes, but that these rulers cannot themselves be Christians. There is something fundamentally incompatible between the life of a Christian and that of a Caesar. What can make Tertullian so openly and certainly opposed to the inclusion of the politically powerful within the fold of Christ? Again, the answer revolves around the hubris of the ruling class. It is impossible for a man to rule without becoming corrupted by the power at his disposal.

Hence arose, very lately, a dispute whether a servant of God should take the administration of any dignity or power, if he were able, whether by some special grace, or by adroitness, to keep himself intact from every species of idolatry. And so let us grant that it is possible for any one to succeed in moving, in whatsoever office, under the mere name of the office, neither sacrificing nor lending his authority to sacrifices.

The purple, or the other ensigns of dignities and powers, dedicated from the beginning to idolatry engrafted on the dignity and the powers, carry the spot of their own profaneness. In things unclean, none can appear clean. If you put on a tunic defiled in itself, it perhaps may not be defiled through you; but you, through it, will be unable to be clean. The Lord walked in humility and obscurity, with no definite home: for “the Son of man,” said He, “has no where to lay His head; unadorned in dress, for otherwise He would not have said, “Behold, those who are dressed in soft raiment are in kings’ houses:” in short, inglorious in countenance and aspect, just as Isaiah had fore-announced. If, also, He exercised no right of power even over His own followers, to whom He discharged menial ministry; if, in short, though conscious of His own kingdom, He shrank back from being made a king, He in the fullest manner gave His own an example for turning coldly from all the pride and garb, as well of dignity as of power. For if they were to be used, who would rather have used them than the Son of God had He not judged the glory of the world to be alien both to Himself and to His? Therefore what He was unwilling to accept, He has rejected. All the powers and dignities of this world are not only alien to, but enemies of, God; through them punishments have been determined against God’s servants; through them, too, penalties prepared for the impious are ignored.

In that last section, decision may seem to have been given likewise concerning military service, which is between dignity and power. There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament, the standard of Christ and the standard of the devil, the camp of light and the camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two masters—God and Caesar. How will a Christian man war, no, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? For albeit soldiers had come to John, and had received the formula of their rule; still the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier. No dress is lawful among us, if assigned to any unlawful action.³⁷

This passage speaks more directly than any to date about the dangers of political pomp.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁷ Tertullian, *On Idolatry*, 17-19.

The argument begins with a recognition of the idolatrous requirements of holding political office, particularly in Rome at that time, where the whole of political and religious life were intermingled. To be involved in politics in Rome was to be involved in idolatry. This in itself would have been a convincing argument for many Christians of the time, however, he continues on to demonstrate more fundamental issues with political power, rather than with Roman political life particularly.

Because Jesus had no part in politics, we also ought to have no part in politics. The man most qualified for a position of leadership came as a lowly servant and turned the world upside down. We as Christians must not seek out positions of authority because “as those in whom all ardor in the pursuit of glory and honor is dead, we have no pressing inducement to take part in your public meetings; nor is there anything more entirely foreign to us than affairs of state. We acknowledge one all-embracing commonwealth—the world.”³⁸ Because we follow Christ we are dead to the allure of worldly acclaim. As such, there is nothing to induce us to enter the political arena. Christians are Christ's representatives in this world, living out his story until he returns. Never desiring to be greater than Christ, the spirit of Christian humility would be utterly compromised in the life of a Christian with the power of an emperor.

Tertullian's Contribution to the Political Discussion

Tertullian wrote as much about the political life as all the other church Fathers to date combined. The great reversal of power that many Christians saw in the person of Christ is applied by Tertullian to the highest office in the world. His respect for the Emperor must be taken as genuine, as he does in many places recognize the position of emperor as being assigned

³⁸ Tertullian, *Apology*, 38.

by God. However, he recognizes the limitations even of great men, that they are only men and are therefore subject to the downfall of pride and arrogance and rebellion. For Tertullian it is unthinkable for a Christian to be a ruler, just as it is unthinkable for a Christian to be a revolutionary, because the pride inherent in either position is absolutely foreign to Christian devotion. The life of a Christian should be founded on an imitation of the humble ministry of Christ and as such there is no place for ruler and no place for rejecting God's appointed authorities. This radical expression of Christian piety and holiness represents the first half of the third century very well, and this radical disconnect between Christian devotion and political aspiration will be seen again before Gallienus' edict in 260 C.E.

Hippolytus

Hippolytus of Rome lived from around 170 C.E. to around 235 C.E. He was a presbyter of the church and wrote a great deal. The largest of his works is the *Refutation of All Heresies*, and his most significant for the political discussion is his *Apostolic Traditions*, written around 215 to 220 C.E.

The Apostolic Tradition and the Holy Community

A series of directions for the operation of day-to-day Christian church life is given in *Apostolic Traditions*, and the first recorded liturgy appears in this text. What follows is a list of unacceptable activities for a catechumen of the church. These defilements must be put away before acceptance into the church is possible due to the unholiness of acts such as practicing magic or living as a prostitute.

If someone is a priest of idols, or an attendant of idols, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. A

military man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out. Nor must he take military oath. If he refuses, he shall be rejected. If someone is a military governor, or the ruler of a city who wears the purple, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God. The prostitute, the wanton man, the one who castrates himself, or one who does that which may not be mentioned, are to be rejected, for they are impure. A magus shall not even be brought forward for consideration. An enchanter, or astrologer, or diviner, or interpreter of dreams, or a charlatan, or one who makes amulets, either they shall cease or they shall be rejected.³⁹

Notice the company in which the soldier and the magistrate find themselves. They fraternize with idolaters, prostitutes, and magicians. The mere act of holding these offices is corrupting in the eyes of the third century church. There is an inherent idolatry in the act of holding political office, and an inherent act of judgment and murder in the case of a military authority who executes men or a soldier who kills them in battle. Hippolytus makes his point uncomfortably clear, all such men are to be rejected from membership in the community. The impurity of idolatry and murder are serious charges, and to see such sins in political life and service is a rigorous standard of holiness. The early church was reliant on God and his peaceable army of spiritual soldiers when it fought with powers rather than the might of legions. To be involved in political life was to sully yourself for the holy community of the church.

Hippolytus' motivation in writing this rather rigorous and challenging outline of church polity is found in the opening and closing passages of the *Apostolic Tradition*. His purposes are first to preserve the tradition handed down by the Apostles and by the ministry of the Spirit⁴⁰ and then to edify the church and preserve the Christian community's holiness so that eternal life may be attained.⁴¹ Here again the judgment of God becomes a motive force for ethical action. These short statements of purpose are important because they recognize that the intense personal and corporate holiness required has a purpose. that purpose is to make certain the community is

³⁹ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 16.8-14.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.1-5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 43.1-2.

ready to be before God.

In his *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* he discusses in more depth the eschatological hope of the church, the resurrection and the Kingdom of God. In ch. 67 of the same work he states: "These things, then, I have set shortly before you, O Theophilus, drawing them from Scripture itself in order that, maintaining in faith what is written, and anticipating the things that are to be, you may keep yourself void of offense both toward God and toward men, "looking for that blessed hope and appearing of our God and Saviour."⁴² The eschatological hope that is in the background in the *Apostolic Traditions* finds its way to the forefront here. Eschatological hope allows for ethical behavior in the present.

Hippolytus' Contribution to the Political Discussion

The primary importance of Hippolytus' work is to show that Christians in the third century took the holiness of their churches very seriously. They saw the political life as compromising this holiness, probably because of idolatry. His writing shows that the third century Fathers assumed the eschatological hope of the *parousia* and of the Kingdom of God as a base for their continued holiness. This also shows that by the time of his writing, around 200-235 C.E., the church as a whole was still very much dedicated to a pre-millennial view of the Kingdom of God. Origen will begin a shift towards an amillennial eschatology in the decades that follow. This amillennial eschatology became the predominant view over the next thousand years. By this time, however, the church was still predominantly pre-millennial.

Origen

⁴² Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist*, 67.

Origen was born in Alexandria around 185 C.E. and was a student of Ammonius Saccas,⁴³ the founder of the Neoplatonic school of philosophy. He developed the germ of Grecian philosophical influence in Clement's work into a full blown Neoplatonic theology. This led him to distrust any literal interpretation of Scripture and to an allegorizing exegesis of passages suggesting a corporeality to God. The shift that Origen began is incredibly significant for later theologians, and Neoplatonic thought became increasingly influential through the next century and remained the dominant view of the church throughout the medieval era.

Origen generally maintained earlier Christian views with regard to political involvement. However, he develops these views differently than those before him. In response to the charges of Celsus in the late second century, he defended the Christian view of God as the Lord of history and the sanctions against political and military involvement in the church. His distinct eschatological views will become apparent in his political writings.

The Climax of History

Origen responds to Celsus' attacks against the church, made several decades before in *The True Word*, a popular work of the time attacking Christianity philosophically, historically, and ethically. Celsus thought that the Christians were foolish for believing in the resurrection and virgin birth (which he ascribes to a Roman soldier named Panthera playing God, so to speak) and attacked their anti-social behavior, telling to serve under the king and preserve the religion of their fathers. Celsus argued that the early Christians set aside the ancient doctrine from Homer's writings that the king is appointed by the gods and should be punished by the emperors. Origen responds with this passage describing the Christian understanding of divine appointment.

⁴³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.19.

But we are far from setting aside the notion of a providence, and of things happening directly or indirectly through the agency of providence. And the king will not "inflict deserved punishment" upon us, if we say that not the son of crafty Saturn gave him his kingdom, but He who "removes and sets up kings." And would that all were to follow my example in rejecting the maxim of Homer, maintaining the divine origin of the kingdom, and observing the precept to honor the king! In these circumstances the king will not "be left in utter solitude and desertion," neither will "the affairs of the world fall into the hands of the most impious and wild barbarians." For if, in the words of Celsus, "they do as I do," then it is evident that even the barbarians, when they yield obedience to the word of God, will become most obedient to the law, and most humane; and every form of worship will be destroyed except the religion of Christ, which will alone prevail. And indeed it will one day triumph, as its principles take possession of the minds of men more and more every day.⁴⁴

Origen's response to Celsus' charges is well designed. Origen takes the accusation of Celsus' and turns it upon its head in the last half of this passage. He admits a statement from Celsus that the barbarians do as the Christians and then reinterprets it, making it an assertion of the power of the Gospel to convert even the most inveterate sinners. Even more so, he shows an almost apocalyptic vision of the Gospel converting the world. Slowly the Christian message marches forward, taking new minds captive to the Gospel of Christ until one day the whole world will be converted. Here is the first expression of the amillennialist hope, the Kingdom of God ministered through the church. This is a fantastic example of how the eschatological hope began to develop in the later third century and early fourth century, shifting from a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth after his return to a figurative rule of Christ through the church, bringing about a golden age in which the church will administer the presence of God to the world.

Political Power and a Kingdom of Priests

Celsus attacks Christianity because it makes Christians anti-social. He sees the Christian devotion to holiness as a rejection of human society and the destruction of civilization. Origen responds by arguing that priests are kept from military service, and that they are not on that

⁴⁴ Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 8.68.

account condemned as misanthropic. Christians are ministers of God and as such must be held aloof from certain activities.

In the next place, Celsus urges us "to help the king with all our might, and to labor with him in the maintenance of justice, to fight for him; and if he requires it, to fight under him, or lead an army along with him." To this our answer is, that we do, when occasion requires, give help to kings, and that, so to say, a divine help, "putting on the whole Armor of God." And this we do in obedience to the injunction of the apostle, "I exhort, therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority;" and the more any one excels in piety, the more effective help does he render to kings, even more than is given by soldiers, who go forth to fight and slay as many of the enemy as they can. And to those enemies of our faith who require us to bear arms for the commonwealth, and to slay men, we can reply: "Do not those who are priests at certain shrines, and those who attend on certain gods, as you account them, keep their hands free from blood, that they may with hands unstained and free from human blood offer the appointed sacrifices to your gods; and even when war is upon you, you never enlist the priests in the army. And as we by our prayers vanquish all demons who stir up war, and lead to the violation of oaths, and disturb the peace, we in this way are much more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them. We do not indeed fight under him, although he require it; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army—an army of piety—by offering our prayers to God.

And if Celsus would have us to lead armies in defense of our country, let him know that we do this too, and that not for the purpose of being seen by men, or of vainglory. For "in secret," and in our own hearts, there are prayers which ascend as from priests in behalf of our fellow-citizens. And Christians are benefactors of their country more than others. For they train up citizens, and inculcate piety to the Supreme Being; and they promote those whose lives in the smallest cities have been good and worthy, to a divine and heavenly city, to whom it may be said, "you have been faithful in the smallest city, come into a great one," where "God stands in the assembly of the gods, and judges the gods in the midst;" and He reckons you among them, if you no more "die as a man, or fall as one of the princes."

Celsus also urges us to "take office in the government of the country, if that is required for the maintenance of the laws and the support of religion." But we recognize in each state the existence of another national organization, founded by the Word of God, and we exhort those who are mighty in word and of blameless life to rule over churches. Those who are ambitious of ruling we reject; but we constrain those who, through excess of modesty, are not easily induced to take a public charge in the church of God. And those who rule over us well are under the constraining influence of the great King, whom we believe to be the Son of God, God the Word. And if those who govern in the church, and are called rulers of the divine nation—that is, the church—rule well, they rule in accordance with the divine commands, and never suffer themselves to be led astray by worldly policy. And it is not for the purpose of escaping public duties that Christians decline public offices, but that they may reserve themselves for a diviner and more necessary service in the church of God—for the salvation of men. And this service is at once necessary and right. They take charge of all of those that are within, that they may day by day lead better lives, and of those that are without, that they may come to abound in holy words and in deeds of piety; and that, while thus worshiping God truly, and training up as many as they can in the same way, they may be filled with the word of God and the law of God, and thus be united with the Supreme God through His Son the Word, Wisdom, Truth, and Righteousness, who unites to God all who are resolved to conform their lives in all things to the law of God.⁴⁵

This passage shows that Origen maintains the traditional viewpoint of the church, that a Christian may not intermingle with the worldly system of political power and physical strife.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.73-75.

Instead Christians form a pure community of priests making intercession for the world. There is little if any reference in this passage to the eschatological hope, and the primary motivation for abstaining from these positions of power was to dedicate oneself to the church's mission of prayer. This again is in keeping with Origen's more spiritualized understanding of the final hope of Christians, making the millennial reign of Christ hoped for by preceding generations a spiritual reign administered through the presence of the church in the world.

Origen's Contribution to the Political Discussion

The amillennial hope first put forward in Origen's writings will become the predominant eschatological view in the fourth century, and the church's political views will change drastically in relation to it. While there is certainly a great deal to be said about the significance of historical events on the development of the church's political stance, the development of amillennialist eschatology coincides with this historical development and potentially opens the church to a more politically active faith. Almost every previous writer first turns to the Kingdom of God when dealing with political questions. Origen's Neoplatonic rejection of literal exegesis leads him to reject a literal bodily resurrection and Kingdom of God⁴⁶. He removes the foundation so central to early Christians in dealing with political powers and replaces it with a spiritual eschatology and a hope of progress, still very much dependent upon the church but not as an alternative community. Rather, the church is seen as the representatives of Heaven on earth. This new approach to eschatology will lead to greater changes in the approaches of Christian thinkers to political issues in the fourth century.

⁴⁶ Origen, *De Principiis*, 2.11.2.

The Third Century church's Political Thought in Review

The third century was a time of turmoil and of development. The century saw more stringent persecution than the two previous centuries, and it also saw more acceptance of the church than ever before. The first half of the century was characterized by rigorist tendencies, theological development and definition, intense persecution and great numerical growth. The statement of Tertullian that the blood of Christians is seed was demonstrated powerfully, and as more men and women added their names to the ranks of the martyrs, more men and women added their names to the ranks of the faithful. The church grew so prominent that it began to come more clearly to the attention of the Roman rulers, and while at first emperors attempted to quell its rising, in the 260's Gallienus became the first emperor to recognize Christianity as a protected religion in a decree recorded in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.

Shortly after this Valerian was reduced to slavery by the barbarians, and his son having become sole ruler, conducted the government more prudently. He immediately restrained the persecution against us by public proclamations, and directed the bishops to perform in freedom their customary duties, in a rescript which ran as follows: "The Emperor Cæsar Publius Licinius Gallienus, Pius, Felix, Augustus, to Dionysius, Pinnas, Demetrius, and the other bishops. I have ordered the bounty of my gift to be declared through all the world, that they may depart from the places of religious worship. And for this purpose you may use this copy of my rescript, that no one may molest you. And this which you are now enabled lawfully to do, has already for a long time been conceded by me. Therefore Aurelius Cyrenius, who is the chief administrator of affairs, will observe this ordinance which I have given."⁴⁷

This development, alone may not have been enough to change the predominant view of the church regarding political life. However, at the same time, a new understanding of exegesis and, as a result, of eschatology was gaining prominence in the church. This allegorizing allowed for a shift in the church's understanding of political life. This shift is evidenced by the persecution of Diocletian in 303 C.E. Persecution first broke out among those in the military and serving in the Caesar's household⁴⁸, positions that would have been unthinkable for Christians

⁴⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.13.1-2

⁴⁸ Lactantius, *On the Death of the Persecutors*, 10.

even in the time of Origen 50 years before.

The political life gains more and more attention in the writings of third century Fathers. The third century Fathers have more to say on the subject than all the previous church Fathers combined. The church Fathers were unified in their rejection of positions of military or political power, which they saw as idolatrous, prideful and murderous. Tertullian states that war is murder and politics idolatry. Jesus disarmed every Christian when he disarmed Peter. He taught and lived out a lifestyle without pomposity or pretense. He went so far even as to say that the Caesars would have become Christians if it were possible for Caesars to join the ranks of the church. Hippolytus, in turn, states that it is impossible for a Christian to be in the military or hold political office without defiling himself and the church. His motivation, as Tertullian's was before him, was thoroughly eschatological. The Christian community must remain pure in expectation of the return of Christ and his judgment before the foundation of a New Heaven and New Earth.

Origen departs from this eschatological hope and, while he maintains hope in a Neoplatonic revision of the Kingdom, he loses the powerful otherness that has been the motive force behind the early church's rejection of political involvement. The church no longer belongs to another Kingdom but to a different spiritual realm. This understanding took hold in the church of the fourth century and remained the prominent view until after the Reformation.

The church's political position took a turn for the better in the 260's, when Gallienus made Christianity a legal, state-sanctioned religion. Now it was no longer illegal to profess Christianity and it would be possible for a Christian to take a position which would have previously been unattainable. Indeed, by the end of the third century, the Christians had taken

their place in the military and in the house of the Caesar himself. This is a drastic shift from the early third century, where political involvement was denied to all church members. With regard to relations of church and state, the second and early third century was an age of intensified animosity, the later third century may be characterized by innovative syncretism.

Fourth Century Fathers

While the fourth century began with a systematic and seemingly overwhelming persecution by Galerius and Diocletian, by the year 313 C.E. Christianity became a legally recognized religion by the Roman state and was afforded many benefits by the government. The rulers of the Roman empire after 313, with the exception of Julian the Apostate (355-363 C.E.), were all professing Christians. This shift is truly incredible, and shows the drastic difference between third and fourth century Christianity in relation to the state.

Eusebius

Eusebius is the most significant of the early fourth century writers because he gives both a detailed eyewitness account of church history and the first example of Christian political establishment. While others had recognized the legitimacy of the government as appointed by God, Eusebius saw the government as the fulfillment of God's promise to his church.⁴⁹ While previous writers have been primarily concerned with theological debates and apologetic defenses, Eusebius is the first church historian. His focus is primarily on the events leading up to Constantine's reign.

⁴⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 10.1.4, discussed below.

While in previous church writings there were very few pertinent writings on political issues, Eusebius presents the reader with such a multitude of passages that to discuss them all in their entirety is simply not possible. A selection must be made as to which texts are important in exhibiting the overall shape of his political thought.⁵⁰ The following passages represent his understanding of Christian political duty.

Eschatological Kingdom of God

Eusebius sees Constantine's rise to power and the Christian empire that resulted as a fulfillment of God's promised Kingdom. In prophetic and apocalyptic terms he describes the peace and unity that he saw after the Diocletian persecution ended and Constantine made Christianity a legal state religion.

We are now permitted to see and celebrate such things as many truly righteous men and martyrs of God before us desired to see upon earth and did not see, and to hear and did not hear. But they, hastening on, obtained far better things, being carried to heaven and the paradise of divine pleasure...testifying to the truth of those recorded utterances, in which it is said, "Come and see the works of the Lord, the wonders which he has done upon the earth; he removes wars to the ends of the world, he shall break the bow and snap the spear in sunder, and shall burn the shields with fire." Rejoicing in these things which have been clearly fulfilled in our day, let us proceed with our account... After this was seen the sight which had been desired and prayed for by us all; feasts of dedication in the cities and consecrations of the newly built houses of prayer took place, bishops assembled, foreigners came together from abroad, mutual love was exhibited between people and people, the members of Christ's body were united in complete harmony. Then was fulfilled the prophetic utterance which mystically foretold what was to take place: "Bone to bone and joint to joint," and whatever was truly announced in enigmatic expressions in the inspired passage.⁵¹

Eusebius' description of the rejoicing after the Edict of Milan is charged with prophetic fulfillment. By declaring these events the expectation of saints in previous generations, he recognizes the reign of Constantine as the Kingdom come. He asserts that the reign of Constantine fulfills eschatological hopes of peace and unity. By allegorizing Ezekiel's vision of

⁵⁰ For a more complete understanding of Eusebius' political thought, read the *Ecclesiastical History*, especially books 8-10 and his *Life of Constantine*.

⁵¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 10.1.4-6, 10.3.1-2.

the dry bones he connects the resurrection with the reign of Constantine. To see these eschatological hopes fulfilled in the figure of a Christian emperor demonstrates the significant departure from the millennial hopes of the earlier church. Instead the New Creation is allegorized and made into an earthly kingdom. Eusebius refers to the events of his time as being “after the bitter captivity and the abomination of desolation,”⁵² showing that he believed the tribulation to be finished and the Kingdom of God established in Constantine’s reign on earth.

Eusebius understood eschatology in a very different light from that of Papias, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and the majority of the earlier church Fathers. This leads to some differences in other areas, as well. While Tertullian and Clement reject political and military service as being compromising and dangerous, Eusebius has no problem whatsoever with Christian participation in either, as is very clear from his description of Constantine’s defeat of Licinius.

For when Licinius carried his madness to the last extreme, the emperor, the friend of God, thinking that he ought no longer to be tolerated, acting upon the basis of sound judgment, and mingling the firm principles of justice with humanity, gladly determined to come to the protection of those who were oppressed by the tyrant, and undertook, by putting a few destroyers out of the way, to save the greater part of the human race. For when he had formerly exercised humanity alone and had shown mercy to him who was not worthy of sympathy, nothing was accomplished; for Licinius did not renounce his wickedness, but rather increased his fury against the peoples that were subject to him, and there was left to the afflicted no hope of salvation, oppressed as they were by a savage beast. Wherefore, the protector of the virtuous, mingling hatred for evil with love for good, went forth with his son Crispus, a most beneficent prince, and extended a saving right hand to all that were perishing. Both of them, father and son, under the protection, as it were, of God, the universal King, with the Son of God, the Saviour of all, as their leader and ally, drew up their forces on all sides against the enemies of the Deity and won an easy victory; God having prospered them in the battle in all respects according to their wish.⁵³

The utter lack of concern for the question of how a Christian can kill his oppressor is lost in Eusebius’ treatment. However, the late second and early third century Fathers were very clear concerning their opinion of political and military involvement, and there is certainly a shift in understanding in the late third or early fourth century. Because Eusebius was born after

⁵² *Ibid.* 10.4.36.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10.9.2.

Gallerian's edict officially tolerating Christianity, it is possible he never knew a time when Christianity was strongly opposed to political and military involvement. In his history of the church he clearly states that he cannot describe the "glory and freedom with which... Christ, was honored among all men... before the persecution in our day. "He also states that Christians were given positions as governors because of the popularity of Christianity and were freed from the requirement to sacrifice.⁵⁴ Christian participation in the government was unprecedented in previous generations, and shows the significant shift that occurred in the late third century. The Christian community was no longer seen as an alternative community by its members. It no longer held itself aloof, but began to be more accepting of political and military involvement. The eschatological shift created an ethical shift, the Kingdom of God became an allegory of the progress of the church, and it lost its power to create an alternative power to that of Rome.

God as Lord of History

Eusebius takes the familiar theme of God as Lord of History and maintains a level of continuity while demonstrating a certain innovation, as well. He describes God as guiding historical events very clearly in many instances. One of his favorite ideas is to talk of God deciding battles for Constantine, his chosen servant to bring an end to the persecutors.

The great Captain of God... suddenly appeared anew, and blotted out and annihilated his enemies and foes, so that they seemed never to have had even a name. But his friends and relatives he raised to the highest glory, in the presence not only of all men, but also of celestial powers, of sun and moon and stars, and of the whole heaven and earth, so that now, as has never happened before, the supreme rulers, conscious of the honor which they have received from him, spit upon the faces of dead idols, trample upon the unhallowed rites of demons, make sport of the ancient delusion handed down from their fathers, and acknowledge only one God, the common benefactor of all, themselves included. And they confess Christ, the Son of God, universal King of all, and proclaim

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.1.1-2.

him Saviour on monuments, what king that ever lived attained such virtue as to fill the ears and tongues of all men upon earth with his own name? What king, after ordaining such pious and wise laws, has extended them from one end of the earth to the other, so that they are perpetually read in the hearing of all men? Who has abrogated barbarous and savage customs of uncivilized nations by his gentle and most philanthropic laws? Who, being attacked for entire ages by all, has shown such superhuman virtue as to flourish daily, and remain young throughout his life? Who has founded a nation which of old was not even heard of, but which now is not concealed in some corner of the earth, but is spread abroad everywhere under the sun? Who has so fortified his soldiers with the arms of piety that their souls, being firmer than adamant, shine brilliantly in the contests with their opponents? What king prevails to such an extent, and even after death leads on his soldiers, and sets up trophies over his enemies, and fills every place, country and city, Greek and barbarian, with his royal dwellings.⁵⁵

This passage indicates that the understanding of God as Lord of History is still of immense significance for Eusebius. All the more so because he sees the events of his time as the culmination of history. All of God's work led to this watershed event, the foundation of a Kingdom of saints. The Gospel is proclaimed to the whole world and the Kingdom has come. Eusebius saw Constantine's legalization of Christianity as the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Eschatological Judgment of God

The eschatological hope of earlier generations is brought into the present in Eusebius' writings, the divine judgment comes on those who oppose the Constantinian empire, while blessing comes to those who support what Eusebius saw as God's Kingdom.

Constantine, however, filled with compassion on account of all these miseries, began to arm himself with all warlike preparation against the tyranny. Assuming therefore the Supreme God as his patron, and invoking His Christ to be his preserver and aid, and setting the victorious trophy, the salutary symbol, in front of his soldiers and body-guard, he marched with his whole forces, trying to obtain again for the Romans the freedom they had inherited from their ancestors... And now those miracles recorded in Holy Writ, which God of old wrought against the ungodly, he in every deed confirmed to all alike, believers and unbelievers, who were eye-witnesses of the wonders. For as once in the days of Moses and the Hebrew nation, who were worshipers of God, "Pharaoh's chariots and his host he has cast into the sea and his chosen chariot-captains are drowned in the Red Sea," so at this time Maxentius, and the soldiers and guards with him, "went

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Ibid. 10.4.14-20.

down into the depths like a stone.”⁵⁶

Constantine is portrayed as the savior of the Christians persecuted by Maxentius in the Eastern part of the Empire. His action is seen as a defense of God's people and a judgment against the tyranny of Maxentius. It is no longer an eschatological judgment of God that is hoped for, but a judgment by God's servants in the world. This is unheard of in previous Christian writings. This marks a shift in Christianity that continues throughout the fourth century, this is the century of Christian conquest. The question of whether a Christian ought to pray for Maxentius is gently ignored. This issue is subsumed under the larger recognition of Constantine as the executor of God's judgment against the ungodly. The eschatological judgment of God becomes human, again reflecting the shift away from a hope for a literal return of Christ and towards a figurative reign through the church.

As with the previous examples, Eusebius takes the earlier Christian eschatological hope and rebuilds it around an amillennial understanding of the Kingdom of God. As a result, he understands the eschatological judgment of God in a radically different way from earlier Christian writers. It is regarded as coming through the Christian empire rather than through the *parousia*.

Eusebius' Contribution to the Political Discussion

Eusebius' contribution to Christian political thought is to show more clearly than ever the amillennial understanding of the Kingdom of God and its significant influence on the political outlook of fourth century Christians. Origen popularized the amillennial view, but never followed

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Eusebius, *The Life of Constantine*, 1.37-38.

it to the conclusions that Eusebius drew in his writings. However, it is unlikely that Eusebius would be able to come to the conclusions he does without the earlier shift in eschatology provided by Origen's allegorical interpretation. Eusebius understood the Christian empire to be the fulfillment of promises made by God concerning his coming Kingdom. This led to an acceptance of Christian involvement in political life that had been unacceptable in previous generations.

Eusebius represents a shift that was already well established by the time of his writing. Christians had already largely recognized political power and military service as acceptable roles for Christians by the time of Diocletian's reign. Eusebius is the first representative of this view to write so vocally, and what was a general trend becomes the official view of the church under Constantine. Eusebius records Christianity's shift to legal religious status, but reflects the already accomplished eschatological shift of the later third century.

Ambrose of Milan

Ambrose's bishopric was itself a representative of the drastic changing of times in the fourth century. After having been a Christian for a matter of days, he was appointed bishop of Milan in 374 C.E. by a riotous crowd.⁵⁷ Surprisingly, however, his appointment by an almost martial law was not a bad decision, and gave the people of Milan a truly dedicated and talented bishop. His primary contribution to the present discussion is in a series of confrontations with

⁵⁷ Paulinus of Florence, *Life of Ambrose*, 5-9.

the emperor Theodosius in 388-390 C.E. In his Epistle to Theodosius⁵⁸ he attacks the emperor's demands that a bishop in Callinicum pay for the reconstruction of a synagogue he ordered his congregation to destroy. Ambrose saw this as treason against God, to rebuild a Jewish house of prayer with Christian funds. His protests demonstrated that the caesaropapism of Constantine's time was beginning to lose strength, and that now the Emperor would be required to submit to the authority of the church. He was victorious, and the emperor promised to rescind his edict under pressure from Ambrose in the assembly, refusing to give communion until he promised to reverse his previous decision.

This victory was followed by another confrontation in 390 C.E. between Ambrose and Theodosius. This time the confrontation was instigated by a massacre of innocent civilians by Theodosius in Thessalonica. A mob uprising brought down Theodosius' wrath but there was no trial and no delineation made between guilty and innocent. All together were slaughtered. When Theodosius desired to enter the church of Ambrose and celebrate the Eucharist, however, he was met at the door and refused entrance into the building. Ambrose accosted him for his bloody act and said "with what feet will you tread that holy threshold, how will you stretch forth your hand still dripping with the blood of unjust slaughter? How in such hands will you receive the all holy body of the Lord? How will you who in your rage unrighteously poured forth so much blood lift to your lips the precious blood? Be gone. Attempt not to add another crime to that which you have committed."⁵⁹ This again reigned in the emperor, demonstrating that the pendulum had swung away from the supremacy of the earthly rulers and toward the side of the church's power on earth over even the emperor. Thus, while the church remained thoroughly political, it had

⁵⁸ Ambrose, *Epistle 40 to the Emperor Theodosius I*.

⁵⁹ Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.17.

begun by the later fourth century to take on its own character altogether. It removed itself from under the imperial umbrella and was forming itself into a powerful political and social institution in its own right.

The Fourth Century Church's Political Thought

Though Eusebius was one of the earliest Fourth Century writers, he is certainly representative of the majority view throughout the century. While there are those who rejected the reign of the Emperor, especially the Donatists in North Africa, these people were cast out as heretics and the Catholic church of the fourth century became a political and social institution rather than retaining the apolitical stance of the church in previous centuries. Politics became an acceptable pursuit for Christians and the acceptance of state-sanctioned violence led to grave consequences. In the fourth century Christian rulers killed more Christians than all the Roman persecutors who preceded them.⁶⁰ This transition is not due entirely to Constantine's rise to power, and it is impossible simply to point to the rise of a Christian emperor in order to explain the so-called Constantinian Shift. There was a slow movement towards Christian political involvement that culminated in the rise of a Christian emperor and his overall acceptance, showing a clear departure from Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Origen in the early-to-mid-third century. The transition occurred before the fourth century began, as Christians in the military and the political and social elite were the first targeted when Diocletian began his persecution in the first years of the fourth century. This shows that a shift had already been accomplished, and as has been previously argued, it seems this shift is due to a different eschatological and political

⁶⁰ Ramsay McMullin, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 14.

climate in the latter part of the third century. After enduring persecution in the early fourth century, Christians gained ultimate freedom under Constantine and grew into an even more significant and powerful body than in previous centuries. This unfortunately but seemingly inevitably led to a loosening of moral strictures, of compromise with the political realities of money, greed, power, and force. Wealthy and greedy men would vie for a bishopric in order to gain the money and power afforded by such a prominent position in the city.⁶¹ Christians would destroy Pagan and Jewish temples and synagogues and assassinate political opponents with militias of church members.⁶² These somewhat shocking events represent the drastic changes of the church's purpose in the world. Instead of patient endurance and faithful witnessing there was violent outbreak and coercion. Instead of purity and holiness in the church there was simony and compromise. In the end of the fourth century Jerome states that "when Christ's church came into the hands of Christian princes, its power and wealth increased but its virtues were diminished."⁶³

This represents a dissenting minority in the fourth century church, intently focused on the need for purity that was lacking in the fourth century church. These were the beginnings of the monastic movement. The vacuum of holiness left in the wake of the church's overwhelming cultural syncretism gave rise to the rejection of civic life altogether. The first monks preferred the desert to the diminished holiness of the church at large.

Conclusion: The Modern Situation

What does this signify for modern readers? How does the early church's slow march

⁶¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, 27.3.12-13.

⁶² Ambrose, *Epistle 40*, Socrates, *Ecc. Hist.*, 5.16, 7.13-15.

⁶³ Jerome, *Life of Malchus the Captive Monk*, 1.

from the Kingdom of God to the kingdom of men speak to those who live in a completely different time and situation? The three major themes help bring clarity to this question. While there is a great gulf between the political world of the Caesars and of today's democratic bent, the timeless teaching of Jesus and his Apostles must be upheld even in a radically different cultural setting. It is paramount, then, that modern readers grasp the significance of these themes on their understanding of political life.

First and foremost, it is clear that one's understanding of the Kingdom of God defines one's approach to the world, including political activism. "In the doctrinal system of Origen which dominated thoughtful Christians in the East during the second half of the third century, the combination of the gospel and of syncretism was a *fait accompli*."⁶⁴ This syncretism meant that the Kingdom of God lost its distinctness and became a utopia rather than an eschatological hope. A distinction must be drawn between the two, the former is the ultimate result of years of human progress, while the latter is more staccato and punctiliar; the Lord will return and establish his Kingdom, the old will pass away and the new will come.

This eschatological hope must return before Christians can recapture the early church's mission and fervor. The radical otherness of the early Christians was a result of their eschatological self-understanding. The early Christians were those on whom the end of the ages had come (1 Cor. 10:11). They lived in the *eschaton* and remained in the world, the firstfruits of a New Creation (Rom. 8:23, Jas. 1:18) culminating in the *parousia* and the recreation of all things (Rev. 21:5). Each of the three major themes of Patristic political thought centered around this eschatological mindset, and the development of amillennialism coincided with and probably had a great influence on the development of political activism and involvement in the late third

⁶⁴ Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity: In the First Three Centuries*, trans. James Moffat (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 315.

and early fourth century, paving the way for Constantine to arrive and bring about what many at the time saw as the Kingdom come on earth. Thus, any hope of an authentic Christian response to the political world requires the reclamation of an authentic Christian understanding of eschatology and ecclesiology. With this eschatological mindset, it will be natural to step into the relationship the early church held toward the world, of being in the world and at the same time wholly other.

What this looks like in practice is difficult to say. It requires both a strong devotion to Christ's counter-cultural message and the church's duty in the world. It cannot simply be said that the church should pull out of all political obligations, this would be impossible. It must be said, however, that Christians should take care whenever politics are concerned, and must be aware of their primary allegiance. Whether or not one adopts the stance of Tertullian and Hippolytus, there must be a real recognition of Christian distinctness and a holy separateness that allows prophetic speech whenever it is required. Unless Christians regain a sense of the story of redemption God is writing in history, and particularly the significance of the end, Christian social and political action is doomed to irrelevance.

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