



THE CHURCH IN  
SOCIETY

# OVERVIEW

- FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT
- THE CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT
- TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

# FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

But you are a chosen **people** (Gr., *genos*), a royal priesthood, a **holy nation** (Gr., *ethnos*), a **people** (Gr., *laos*) belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as **God's chosen people**, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:11-12)

# FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.” (John 18:36)

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”  
(John 15:18-19)

# FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

So when they [the apostles] met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and **you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**” (Acts 1:6-8)

# FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## 1 Peter 2:9

Dear friends, I urge you, as **aliens and strangers** in the world...

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ...

Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

# FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## Hebrews 11:13-16

And they admitted that they were **aliens and strangers** on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.

# FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## Wilderness Wandering

### Hebrews 3:14-16

We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said:

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?

# FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## Wilderness Wandering

### **1 Corinthians 10:1-4**

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

# The word “Christian” is only found 3 times in the NT

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch **and began to speak to Greeks also**, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus ... *The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.* (Acts 11:19-20, 26)

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me *to be a Christian?*” (Acts 26:28)

However, *if you suffer as a Christian*, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. (1 Peter 4:16)

In the first century, no one would have proposed the idea of a “Christian” society — there was not even a hint of this.

But unfortunately, by the third century we can already see forces at work to make the church more acceptable to society, and society more acceptable to the church.

# Rigor vs. Laxity in the Church

- Tertullian [c. 155 – 240 CE] – prolific Latin Christian writer
- Cyprian [c. 200 – 258 CE] – Bishop of Carthage (died a martyr)

# On The Lapsed (Cyprian, c. 249 AD)

*The Standard of Church Membership Must Be Maintained.*

- The Church before the persecution was blemished with greed, worldliness, marriage to unbelievers and bishops who were busy with business and neglecting the flock. [¶6]
- Since the essence of being a disciple was ‘giving up everything,’ every Christian should be ready to confess and be martyred. [¶10,11]
- The lapsed needed to truly lament and mourn for their sin, and make right confession – those that continued to live in a worldly manner disregarding the poor should not be accepted. [¶29-33,35]

# THE CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT

The beginning of the fourth century contained some serious milestones:

- In 301, Armenia become the first country to officially recognize as their national religion (followed by Georgia in 317)
- In 311, the last great persecution of the Roman Empire ended with the “Edict of Toleration”
- In 313, the emperors Constantine and Licinius declared Christianity legal and affirmed religious freedom

# THE CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT

- In 325, the Emperor Constantine called the First Council of Nicaea as an effort to attain consensus in the church
  - Formulation of the Nicene Creed which the most specific statement of faith to date
- In 391, the Emperor Theodosius ordered the cessation of sacrifices and the closing of pagan temples
- The Roman Empire was now officially “Christian” and religious freedom greatly diminished (if not even extinguished)

# THE CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT



# THE CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT AND THE REFORMATION

## *Church, State and Civil Society (David Fergusson)*

- Luther & Calvin – “the reform of Christendom, the whole of the civilized Christian world, rather than the mere creation and protection of a new church.”
  - Luther – Augustinian framework “the just ruler has a duty to maintain the security and well-being of the church”
  - Calvin – “sought a a close relationship between church and civil authorities”

# THE CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT AND THE REFORMATION

## *Church, State and Civil Society (David Fergusson)*

- Menno Simon – “a sectarian withdrawal from society” ...
  - emphasized the explicitly ethical witness that the church was to make to the world, “purity of doctrine and a scriptural administration of the sacraments, ... obedience to the Word of God, brotherly and sisterly love, a bold confession of God and Christ, and a readiness to embrace suffering for the sake of the Word.”

# THE CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT AND THE REFORMATION

- With all the amazing biblical exploration and discovery accompanying the Reformation, almost all the key Reformers were “Constantinian” in their ecclesiology.
- It may be this reason alone, that “infant baptism” was not changed in many Reformation churches since infant baptism complements the idea of a “national / cultural” church.

# THE CONSTANTINIAN SHIFT

*The Mystic Way of Evangelism (Elaine Heath)*

Sadly, with the whole Constantinian shift, the church has become more like the world than the world becoming like the church. In many places Christianity has solidified (even petrified) into a new type of social order that differs very little from the world around it. Every member of the church is called to ministry, and it is the mandate of all church leadership to train and equip the members of Christ's body.

# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## John 15:18-20

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.



# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## John 7:7

The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that what it does is evil .



# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

**John 15:26-27; 16:7b-11**

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. ... Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.



# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## 1 Peter 2:19-23

**For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.** But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

“He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## 1 Peter 3:13-17

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, **keeping a clear conscience**, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. **It is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.**

# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## 1 Peter 4:1-5

Therefore, **since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude**, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## 1 Peter 4:12-19

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ...



# TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT

## 1 Peter 4:12-19

For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And,

“If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,  
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”

So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.



# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

“... the only cure for a Constantinian church is the church’s visible obedience and faithful witness, on the one hand, and a respect for the integrity of the world’s disbelief on the other hand.”

Modernity “is the story of a world that believes itself to have ‘come of age’” and “society is now to be construed as a contract between individuals whose freedom (or ‘right’) to pursue their own private ends and maximize their own self-interest is restricted only by the freedom (or ‘right’) of other individuals to do the same.”

*Stone, Evangelism after Christendom (p. 130-131, 141).*

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Such self-interest comes at direct odds to the purposes of God in the formation of the church, and the church can be tempted to accommodate and center evangelism on offering services and help in ways that society markets and demands. Instead, “the church is called to reach out to the world ... as a response to and participation in the salvation it has been given.”

*Stone, Evangelism after Christendom (p. 168).*