

[MJTM 12 (2010–2011)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Peter J. Leithart. *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010. 373 pp. ISBN 978-0-8308-2722-0.

If a dictatorial government was ready to kill me because of my Christian faith, and a new ruler took charge who stopped that threat, I would appreciate the new direction in policy, and for that new policy, the ruler who made the change. The Roman Emperor Constantine made just such a dramatic shift against precedent and in defiance of most of his subjects. In *Defending Constantine*, Peter Leithart makes the case that, far from aligning himself with Christ for political advantage, Constantine attempted to follow Christ at great personal and political risk. From where Constantine started with the Roman Empire, the changes that he implemented were often positive and significant, from substantial religious freedoms to the end of the ubiquitous state requirements for blood sacrifice. For all his faults, in Constantine we may well see someone attempting to leverage his political power faithfully over an unwieldy empire.

This more nuanced description of Constantine and his reign is a much-needed corrective to the broad brush associated with John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. Their relentless lambasting of Constantine as a disaster for the church has been influential, but misleading. With careful investigation we can see that Constantine cannot be characterized accurately as having always used Christian concerns for his own ends or as always leading the church to harm. His story is much more complex than that. To their credit, Yoder and Hauerwas do helpfully remind us not to equate any form of statism with God's kingdom. Even a perfected human government would not be the kingdom of heaven. However, realizing that distinction does not relieve us of the responsibility to do the best we can, where we can, in living out the gospel. Some government policies can show more or less love for our neighbors. When followers of Christ are called to serve in government, or for that matter to

LEITHART *Defending Constantine*

vote for who leads it, they can do that for good or ill in varying degrees. They are responsible to God both for what they do and what they fail to do, as was Constantine. Granted, Yoder rejects the possibility of a follower of Christ being called to serve as emperor or in any other government position that includes the exercise of force; yet in so doing he loses much of the experience, insight, and witness of those seeking to follow Christ over the last 2000 years.

I hope this work launches dozens of dissertations in the primary sources to further clarify Constantine's story and what it might offer in approach and warning. In some locales, Christians again have access to significant political power and need to consider how it should and should not be wielded. Leithart does a great service in directing us to a more nuanced view of Constantine and his governance, both out of fairness to one who faced daunting challenges, and for us to consider further how we should relate government power and love of neighbor in the world today.

James C. Peterson  
Roanoke College  
Salem, Virginia 24153