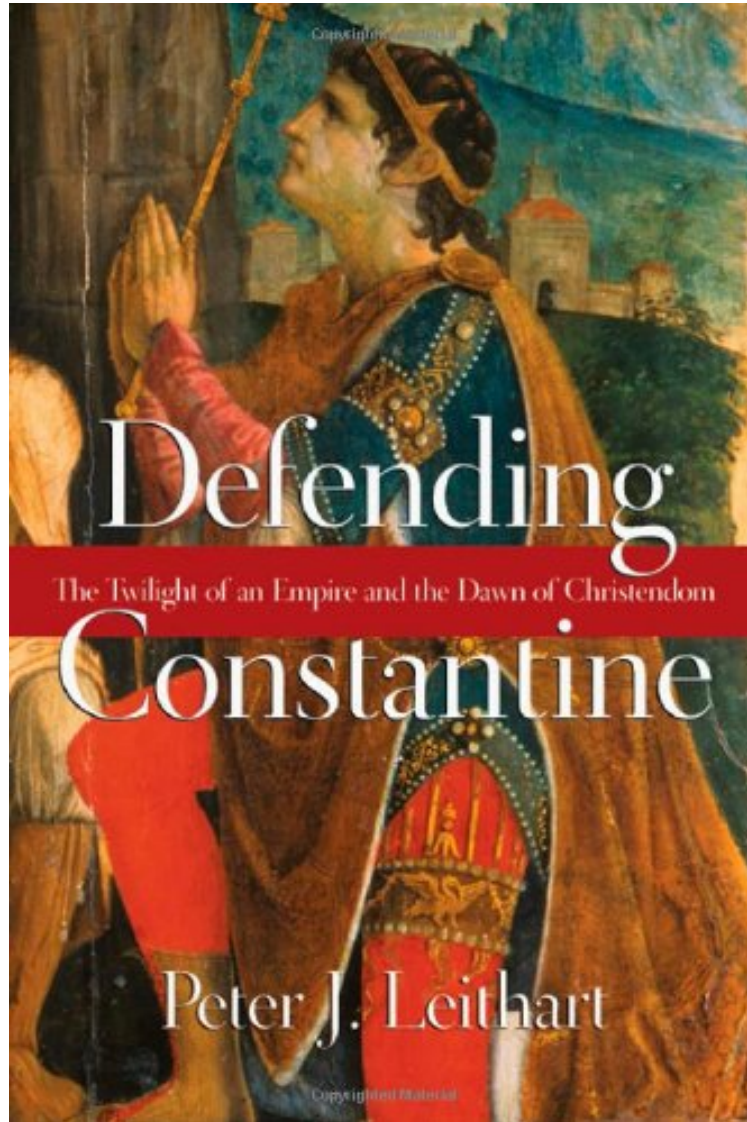


(Download pdf) Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom

Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom

Peter J. Leithart

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Peter J. Leithart : Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A work of stunning scholarshipBy readergFor too long Protestants of every tradition have attacked Constantine, and in so doing attacked the Catholic Church. However, Leithart sets the

historical record straight, answering all of those who strive mightily to assert that the Catholic Church "fell" and that the so-called fall was the direct result of the efforts of Constantine. In Leithart's book, Constantine appears more as a 4th century St. Paul encountering Christ on the road to Damascus. In the case of Constantine this direct encounter with Christ occurred on the road to Rome as he prepared to do battle with Maxentius, and neither Constantine, nor the Roman Empire, nor the the Catholic Church was ever the same again. Because of Constantine and all of his work in support of the Church, Christians were able to finally come out of their hidden churches and into the light of day, freely testifying of their faith in Jesus Christ without fear of reprisal. The Church grew greatly in the years after Constantine legalized Christianity, allowing Christians to convert millions of pagans to the faith. I highly recommend this book for anyone who wants to clear the air on the life and conversion of Constantine, a man whose conversion to Christianity has always been recognized and treasured by both the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches, but now perhaps even among the various traditions and denominations of protestantism as they learn the truth.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. **Leithart Contra Munde** By Peter S. Bradley As Peter Leithart points out in his "Defending Constantine: the Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christianity," Emperor Constantine has often been made into the bte noire of those who have some particular grievance against the world they live in. Constantine is a particular target for those who dislike the institutionalized Christian church, the role of Catholicism in history or the existence of what they consider to be an intolerant, patriarchal or otherwise wrong-headed form of Christianity. Leithart's self-described "polemical" purpose is to re-examine Constantine in light of the state of Christianity as Constantine found it at the beginning of the Fourth Century, shorn of the usual retrojection of current ideology. Leithart's particular target is late Mennonite, pacifist theologian John Howard Yoder, whose theology developed the idea of "Constantinianism," whereby, in Yoder's view, Christianity went horribly off the rails when the church formed an alliance with the state. Leithart's book is well worth reading for its fresh look at Constantine and its common sense critique of critics of Constantine. For example, Leithart marshals a persuasive rebuttal to the contemporary view of Constantine as a pagan or a cynic who exploited religion for political purposes. Leithart finds substantial evidence in Constantine's life that point to a true believer in Christianity, such as legislation by Constantine that began the process of eliminating gladiatorial games, infant exposure and sacrifices to the pagan gods. These laws seem to have been aspirational, but they point to Constantine's adherence to a Christian value system. Likewise, Constantine considered himself a missionary and would give sermons to his court. For myself, I was forced to re-evaluate my previous view - engendered by the typical works on Constantine - that Constantine was uninterested in, and ignorant of, the fine points of Christian theology. Constantine may not have been a theologian, but in Leithart's description, Constantine comes off as far more theologically sophisticate. For example, Leithart quotes Constantine's "Letter to Arius" as follows, "I know that the plenitude of the Father's and the Son's pre-eminence and all-pervading power is one substance." Likewise, Leithart offers an explanation for the death of Constantine's wife and son, which partially exonerates Constantine. Given that even my 12 year old daughter has learned in public school that Constantine was unquestionably a murderer, suggesting some uncertainty in an ancient mystery might have the effect of moving the zeitgeist away from its knee-jerk anti-Constantinian default position. Leithart also examines the world of the early Christians. Christianity had been subjected to intense persecution under Diocletian, immediately prior to Constantine's reign. Christians had also experienced persecutions under prior emperors. During those persecutions, Christians had prayed for deliverance, and for such Christians, a Christian emperor looked exactly like what they had been praying for. Contemporary critics of Constantine and the Christian assumption of power in the Roman Empire should really answer the question, what were Christian supposed to do? Remain a persecuted minority? People who think that Christians should never have assumed political power have a highly romanticized view of persecution and suffering. In the last part of the book, Leithart tackles Yoder's critique of "Constantinianism." Yoder and his supporters assume a primeval Christianity that disdained any role in the state and uniformly embraced pacifism. Leithart demonstrated that no such uniform position ever existed. Christians, for example, joined the military with the acquiescence of their bishops from the earliest moments of Christianity. Hence, Yoder's pacifism represents a strain of Christianity, but Constantine hardly represents a betrayal of "true Christianity." I suspect that there are subtexts in the dispute over Yoder's "Constantinianism" which are lost on those of us who are not immersed in religious traditions that adhere to a "Two Kingdoms" theology. For example, I'm not clear why Yoder's work, largely a product, it would seem of the peace movement of the '70s, would require such a strong critique in 2010. I had the feeling of being ringside to a scholarly infight without having a real sense of the players and the positions. Nonetheless, any good grudge match sharpens the issues in dispute and heightens audience interest, which may be one reason why this book was a thoroughly engaging read.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. **Pacifism, Nonviolence, and Yoder** By geekpreacher This is a very balanced critique of Yoder's "Constantinian Captivity" of the church. Leithart attempts to show Yoder's pacifistic take on the early church was not as large spread a view as Yoder would have one believe. Leithart also does an admirable job of showing that Constantine's acceptance and legalization of Christianity had a positive effect on the church and was not as overwhelmingly negative as some modern scholars suggest.

We know that Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 outlawed paganism and made Christianity the official

religion of the Roman Empire manipulated the Council of Nicea in 325 exercised absolute authority over the church, co-opting it for the aims of empire And if Constantine the emperor were not problem enough, we all know that Constantinianism has been very bad for the church. Or do we know these things? Peter Leithart weighs these claims and finds them wanting. And what's more, in focusing on these historical mirages we have failed to notice the true significance of Constantine and Rome baptized. For beneath the surface of this contested story there emerges a deeper narrative of the end of Roman sacrifice--a tectonic shift in the political theology of an empire--and with far-reaching implications. In this probing and informative book Peter Leithart examines the real Constantine, weighs the charges against Constantinianism, and sets the terms for a new conversation about this pivotal emperor and the Christendom that emerged.

From Publishers Weekly Leithart (Deep Exegesis), a pastor who teaches at New St. Andrews College in Moscow, Idaho, takes aim at the received wisdom that Constantine's establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire was a political co-optation that made the church the creature and justification of the imperial state. He reads the original ancient, the seminal secondary, and lots of other sources to contend that Constantine was a believer and a conciliator who sought theological agreement for the political stability it brought. Contra the influential interpretation of Anabaptist theologian John Howard Yoder, Leithart maintains that when Constantine is understood in historical context, his disestablishment of pagan religion opens a place for a Christian understanding of sacrifice and of the significance of the kingdom of God. His provocative view deserves examination. Besides his peers, general readers with a close knowledge of early church history will appreciate his well-supported argument, and anybody whose understanding of early church history comes from *The Da Vinci Code* needs to read this. (Nov.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. ". . . this work should serve as a welcome redress of the often one-sided debate regarding Constantine and Constantinianism." (Britton W. Norvell, *Restoration Quarterly*, 55:1 (2013)) "This book is a must read for anyone assaying to deal with Constantine in the foreseeable future; it is a valuable correction of the tendentious views that frame the first Christian emperor. Leithart's work is a welcome contribution to Constantine scholarship and should find its place in responsible library collections. Scholars will want to get their own copy, and many classes will be enriched by the addition of this book to the list of required readings." (James R. Payton, Jr., *Calvin Theological Journal*, November 2012) "In *Defending Constantine* [Leithart] has done the historian, theologian, church leader, and layman a great service by providing an enjoyably readable historical-theological-conceptual look at this critical era of church history." (Michael Philliber, *Touchstone*, January/February 2012) "Defending Constantine demonstrates the enduring relevance of the 'Constantinian moment' of the fourth century. While recent scholarship has focused mainly on the negative results, Leithart swings the pendulum back, reminding us of all the good that God brought about from this contested period of history." (Trevin Wax, *Christianity Today*, March 2011) "Here is an excellent scholarly and fair treatment of Constantine." (*Christian News*, November 15, 2010) "This erudite work will be of interest to academic seminarians and theologians, as well as those seeking a historically sound Christian interpretation of Constantine." (Matthew Connor Sullivan, *Library Journal*, December 2010) "Leithart has written an important book that does more than help us to better understand the complex human being who bore the name of Constantine. . . As a pacifist I could not want a better conversation partner than Peter Leithart." (Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Century*, October 19, 2010) "For a generation that thinks it approves of those who challenge the conventional wisdom, it can come as quite a shock when someone actually does it. In this book, Peter Leithart takes up the daunting challenge of defending Constantine, and he does it with biblical grace, deep wisdom, profound learning and scholarship that has let the clutch out. This is a magnificent book." (Douglas Wilson, senior fellow of theology, New Saint Andrews College, Idaho) "An excellent writer with a flair for the dramatic, Peter Leithart is also one of the most incisive current thinkers on questions of theology and politics. In this book, Leithart helpfully complicates Christian history, and thereby helps theologians recover the riches of more than a millennium of Christian life too easily dismissed as 'Constantinian.' If the Holy Spirit did not simply go on holiday during that period, we must find ways to appreciate Christendom. Any worthwhile political theology today cannot fail to take Leithart's argument seriously." (William T. Cavanaugh, Research Professor, Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology, DePaul University, Chicago) "There have been of late a splurge of populist history books damning Constantine the Great as the villain of the piece. Almost without exception they have drawn their picture of this most complex and complicated of late-antique Roman emperors from secondhand, cliché and hackneyed books of an older generation, adding their own clichés in the process. Constantine has been sketched luridly, as the man who corrupted Christianity either by financial or military means. At long last we have here, in Peter Leithart, a writer who knows how to tell a lively story but is also no mean shakes as a scholarly historian. This intelligent and sensitive treatment of one of the great military emperors of Rome is a trustworthy entrée into Roman history that loses none of the romance and rambunctiousness of the events of the era of the civil war, but which also explains why Constantine matters: why he was important to the ancient world, why he matters to the development of Christianity (a catalyst in its movement from small sect to world-embracing cultural force). It does not whitewash or damn on the basis of a preset ideology, but it certainly does explain why Constantine gained from the Christians the epithet 'The Great.' For setting the record straight, and for providing a sense of the

complicated lay of the land, this book comes most highly recommended." (John A. McGuckin, Columbia University)"Too many people, for far too long, have been able to murmur the awful word Constantine, knowing that the shudder it produces will absolve them from the need to think through how the church and the powers of the world actually relate, let alone construct a coherent historical or theological argument on the subject. Peter Leithart challenges all this, and forces us to face the question of what Constantine's settlement actually was, and meant. Few will agree with everything he says. All will benefit enormously from this challenge to easygoing received 'wisdom.'" (N. T. Wright, University of St. Andrews, Scotland)About the AuthorPeter J. Leithart (PhD, University of Cambridge) is president of Theopolis Institute and an adjunct senior fellow of theology at New Saint Andrews College in Moscow, Idaho. He is the author of many books including *Defending Constantine*, *Traces of the Trinity* and *Gratitude: An Intellectual History*. He is a blog writer and columnist for firstthings.com, and he has published articles in many periodicals, both popular and academic. Ordained in the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), Leithart pastored Reformed Heritage Presbyterian Church (now Trinity Presbyterian Church) in Birmingham, Alabama, and Trinity Reformed Church in Moscow, Idaho. He and his wife Noel have ten children and seven grandchildren.