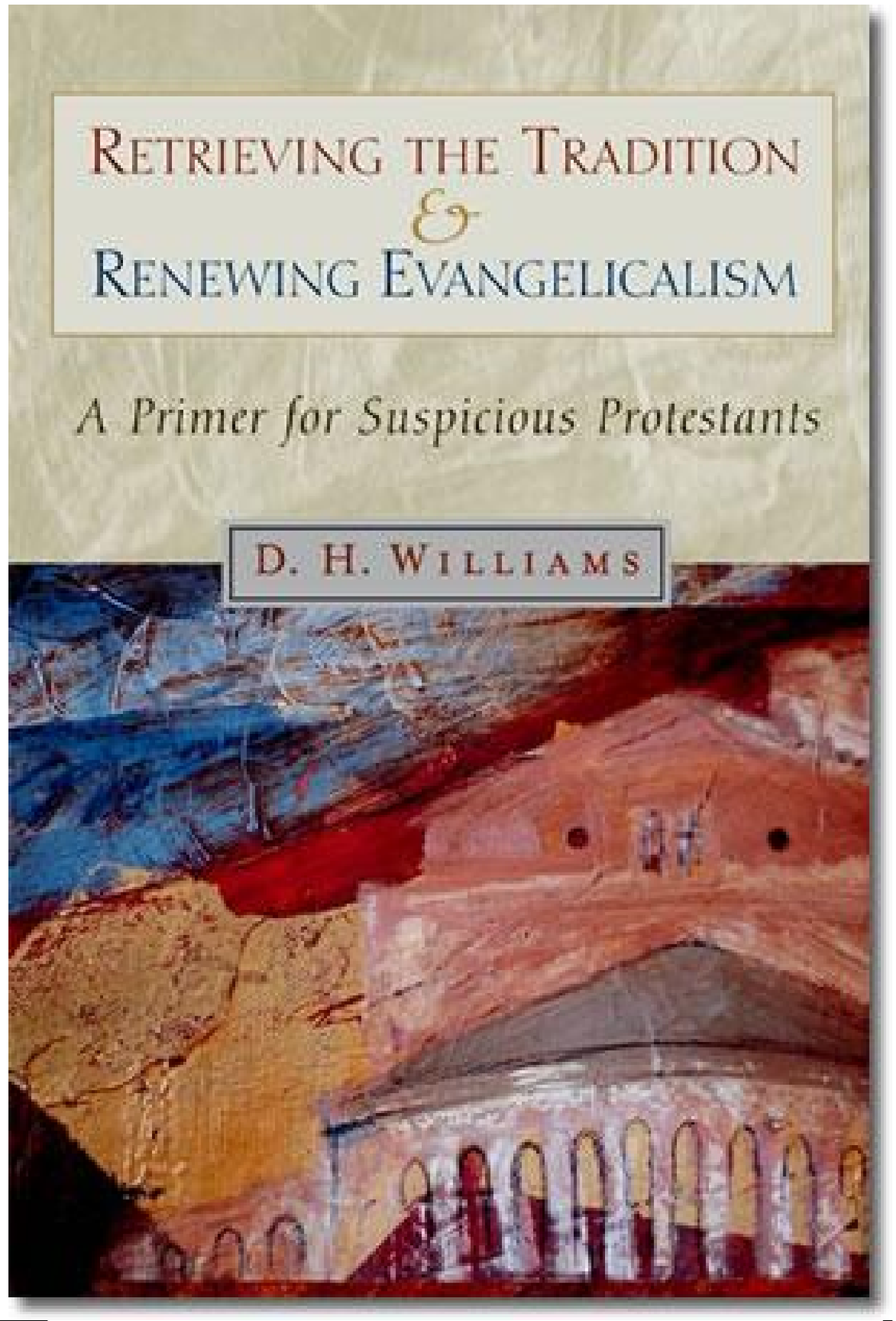

Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism

A Primer for Suspicious Protestants

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CHAPTER 4

The Corruption of the Church and Its Tradition

If the ancient Church was in error, the Church [of today] is fallen.

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

An evangelical with an ahistorical faith is a superficial one.

Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage*

Why is it that so many evangelicals who reflect on the heritage of their faith jump so easily from the New Testament to the Protestant Reformation with little concern or understanding for all that has taken place in between? How has it come about that one can worship for months or even years in many Free Church settings and hardly ever hear in the singing or the preaching express interaction with the message of the early Fathers? After all, hundreds of sermons, commentaries and hymns from the first five centuries have been preserved and translated into English. One may occasionally hear a quote from Calvin's scriptural commentaries, but never one from Origen's or Jerome's. On those very rare occasions when I have introduced patristic theology or spirituality within my own Baptist context, I have been met with a variety of reactions ranging from grateful-

ness for the exposure to new ideas, to curiosity combined with a wariness about promoting matters in church that are not biblical. Why are the ancient voices so muted?

I want to take up the idea again that a great deal of the Free Church and evangelical suspicion about the viability of the church's patristic Tradition is directly related to a negative or an ambivalent view of post-apostolic Christianity. First-century believers are given high marks for preaching and preserving the original gospel message, but in the ages that followed, the faith of the church is thought to have become corrupted by adhesion to practices and rituals which were foreign to the New Testament. The ensuing history of the church, therefore, is a history of something having gone wrong.

In this chapter, our focus will be on the evidence that has supported this perception of the church which became prevalent during and after the sixteenth-century Reformation, namely, that the church "fell" at some point after the apostolic era, and that from this fallen condition emerged an alien charter of faith (usually seen as the Roman Catholic Church, replete with its hierarchical priesthood, creeds and councils, holy days, sacraments, etc.). During these intervening centuries of ecclesial degeneration, all was not lost, however. A remnant of true believers, often rejected by the institutional church, could be found here and there in every age carrying on the torch of the gospel. Finally, in the bursting forth of the Protestant Reformation, the biblical faith of the New Testament was restored and set on its originally intended course.

For a great many clergy and laity, this description is ecclesiastical reality; it is the way that they conceive of the church and her history, if only implicitly. A key factor, however, is often not taken into account with the above sketch, namely, that it is a *paradigm* — a constructed pattern or model — of interpreting church history, which itself has a history determined by certain motivations which gave rise to it and caused it to flourish. As a paradigm, therefore, it is not the only way of looking at the church's past, and as a paradigm, it should always be subject to correction.

There are a number of assumptions at work in this paradigm of which contemporary Protestants may not even be aware, but which have resulted in effectively (1) creating a gulf between Protestantism and its patristic foundation, and (2) spawning ahistorical interpretations of church history that are based on a kind of spiritual successionist model that connects the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) directly with the present-day church by transcending the external (outward) institutions of the historic church.

The first assumption leaves the false impression that Protestant Christianity is a development independent of, or even despite, the patristic (and medieval) church, while the second proposes a counter-historical solution to the claim for continuity — how we are connected to the age of the apostles — on the basis of our spiritual connection to the "true church" of history. We will find in this and the next chapter that these perspectives are neither warranted by a firsthand knowledge of the early sources themselves, nor do they better secure an orthodox understanding of the Christian faith. Moreover, the role of church history itself is seen, quite erroneously, as an expendable commodity in the way one ought to appropriate faith in Christ and pursue discipleship for today. Until the "fall" paradigm of viewing church history is revamped, or at least put in a more limited perspective, it will be exceedingly difficult for evangelicals to accept the "consensual tradition" of the early church.[1] For as long as a negative view of most of church history persists, there is no good reason to be reconciled with our pre-Reformation inheritance. Simply being introduced to the foundations and vitality of the early Christian Tradition is not going to be sufficiently convincing unless it is accompanied by a realignment of the church's past. To accomplish such a realignment, we need to take a more detailed look at certain historical dynamics at work in the late medieval and the Reformation periods as they relate to the early church. We will find that the points of theological and historical disjuncture between the Reformation and its patristic-medieval precursors have been highly overrated for too long.

The "Fall" of the Church

The concept of the fall of the church has always been perceived as axiomatic for the Protestant identity. Already in the first half of the sixteenth century, opinions varied as to the moment when the decline began in the post-apostolic period. For some of the early Anabaptist Reformers, such as Thomas Müntzer, the Christian church lost its virginity and became an adulteress soon after the death of the disciples of the apostles because of

1. As advanced by the writings of Thomas Oden. See his *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), esp. 106, 160-64, and the preface to vol. 1 of his systematic theology, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), or major projects like The Church's Bible, forthcoming from Eerdmans Publishing Company, designed to encourage evangelicals to reclaim their ancient heritage.

corrupt leadership,[2] manifested in the predominance of a clergy who cared more for the amassing of property and power than for the acquiring of spiritual virtues. Spiritualist Reformer Sebastian Franck heartily agreed, arguing that the outward church of Christ was wasted immediately after the apostles because the early Fathers, whom he calls "wolves" and "antichrists," justified war, power of magistracy, tithes, the priesthood, etc.[3] Franck knew firsthand what he called the writings of the "doctors of the Roman church," but (unlike the majority of his contemporaries) he utterly scorned them. That they are "wolves" within Christ's flock is, he claims,

> proved by their works, especially [those] of Clement, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Chrysostom, Hilary, Cyril, Origen, and others which are merely child's play[4] and quite unlike the spirit of the apostles, that is, filled with commandments, laws, sacramental elements and all kinds of human inventions. . . . What they have written is nothing but a shame and a disgrace.[5]

Although most leaders of the various Free Church movements did not share such a dim view of the earliest centuries, Franck's portrayal of the early church had a weighty influence on subsequent Free Church historiography.[6]

For the bulk of the Middle Ages and later reform movements, however, the critical transformation of the church as an institution occurred

2. Thomas Müntzer, "Sermon Before the Princes" (Allstedt, 13 July 1524), in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers,* ed. G. H. Williams, vol. 15 of Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 51.

3. Sebastian Franck, *Letter to Campanus,* in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers,* 151-52. Written in 1531 or 1541.

4. A different manuscript of the text says, "full of ravings and alien nonsense."

5. *Ibid.,* 148-49.

6. Particularly influential was a historical chronicle of Sebastian Franck, *Chronica. Zeitbuch vnnd Geschichtbibell von anbegyn bisz in diss gegenwertig* (Stuttgart, 1536). It is mentioned in 1560 by Obbe Philips as a reference work for the teachings of leading Anabaptists (although Franck was very critical of all organized churches, including the Anabaptists), and for providing historical guidance for author of *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (1665). Anabaptist writer Pilgram Marpeck cites the *Chronica* as useful for its view of the Fathers (*The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck,* trans. and ed. W. Klassen and W. Klaasen [Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1978], 285), as does Menno Simons in his 1539 "Foundations of Christian Doctrine," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561,* trans. L. Verduin and ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1956), 138.

once Constantine became emperor and embraced Christianity. The moment seemingly so beneficial for the life of the church was the very point of its downfall. The famous John Wesley was most insistent upon this point in his sermon, "The Mystery of Iniquity":

> The grand blow was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian. . . . [j]ust so, when the fear of persecution was removed, and wealth and honour attended the Christian profession, the Christians did not gradually sink, but rushed headlong into all manner of vices. Then the mystery of iniquity was no more hid, but stalked abroad in the face of the sun. Then, not the golden, but the iron age of the church commenced.[7]

Ever since the death of Constantine in 337, Christian historians have wrestled with the implications of his rule for the church. He was not the first emperor to proclaim toleration for Christianity, but by 312,[8] the Roman world beheld an emperor who was identifying himself with the Christian faith in such a way that he believed the proper worship of "the Deity" was of vital importance for the welfare of the empire, and regarded himself as God's servant.[9] The social and political ramifications of Constantine's "conversion" were highly significant: Christians were reimbursed from the imperial treasury for their losses during the previous persecution, Christian clergy were exempted from the onerous burden of public obligations and could not be tried in civil courts, Christian nobility were more likely to be elected to high office, Christian basilicas — some of them very lavish in Jerusalem and Constantinople — were built from public funds, individuals were allowed to will their property after death to the

7. John Wesley, *Sermon* 61.27, in *The Works of John Wesley,* vol. 2, ed. A. C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 463.

8. October 28, 312 was the battle of the Milvian bridge where Constantine was victorius over Maxentius for the control of the Western empire, which is also the approximate time, according to the differing accounts of Eusebius and Lactantius, that Constantine experienced a theophany convincing him to embrace the Christian religion. Exactly how this experience was a "conversion" must be taken into account with the evidence that Constantine was already refusing to persecute Christians and eschewed polytheism, as his father Constantius I had done in Britain and the Gauls.

9. The more useful studies on this subject are A. H. M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978); T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1985); and H. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

church, councils of bishops were convened using imperial means for their transportation and accommodation, decisions promulgated by major councils were enforced by the authority of the state, all pagan symbolism and inscriptions were banned from Constantinople, and finally, Constantine became fully immersed in the Christian faith by being baptized in Nicomedia just before his death.[10] Whatever darker shadows his political agenda may have cast on his Christian sympathies,[11] and there has been much ink spilled on this, Constantine sincerely believed that God had given him a mandate to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity.[12] More significantly, the church's relation to the empire would never be the same again, as Christianity eventually moved from being a persecuted sect to the preeminent religion of the Mediterranean world, and its leaders became the chief arbiters in juridical matters and military conflicts.

In her play, *The Emperor Constantine,* Dorothy Sayers may have been right in thinking that it was inevitable for Christianity to cease from being a minority cult, if not by Constantine then by some other means, such that "the power of the purse and sword" must come into Christian hands.[13] As rapidly as Christianity was growing and permeating all the strata of Roman society, it was just a matter of time before Christianity would be embraced by an emperor and come to dominate the religious and social world of the empire. But at what price did such a transformation occur? What would the social and political triumph of the church mean for its role in the world as the incorporation and herald of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

10. Putting off baptism until later in life was quite common among Christians in the fourth and fifth centuries, especially among the nobility (e.g., Ambrose of Milan and his brother Satyrus), unless a serious illness intervened.

11. For example, Constantine continued to incorporate the worship of Sol Invictus (the Unconquerable Sun) in his public images on coins, in the famous triumphal arch erected in his honor in 315, being religiously neutral in both its symbolism and inscriptions (which may in part be explained by the fact that the Roman senate sponsored its erection), and in the pagan honorary title of Pontifex Maximus which was maintained until his death. Exactly how Constantine understood the Christian message is not clear, although one can certainly trace a development in the emperor's grasp of his Christian commitment from the victory in 312 to his conquest of the Eastern empire in 324. Moreover, the emperor's presence at some church councils, most notably Nicaea, indicates a veritable interest in theological matters.

12. *Oration to the Saints,* 11.1.

13. Dorothy Sayers, *The Emperor Constantine: A Chronicle* (London: Gallancz, 1951), 5.

The answer to these questions generated varying responses and is directly related to how the patristic legacy would eventually be regarded.

The Formation of the Paradigm

The idea of Christianity's corruption after Constantine and need for reform was hardly a novel idea with Protestantism, having taken less divisive forms already in the preaching of Francis of Assisi or Jean Gerson. A host of reforming initiatives swept through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries[14] (aimed mainly at the clergy and monastic institutions), characterized by a heightened understanding of the Bible and an emphasis on returning to the faith of the apostolic church. Central to these initiatives was the contention that the pristine and simple character of the original church was opposed to what the church had become. The very fact of the church's present corruptions implied that a discontinuity between the apostolic era and the post-apostolic church existed. Such a view can be found affecting a wide variety of thinkers in the high Middle Ages such as the Spiritual Franciscans, William of Ockham, Joachim of Fiore, and more popular protest movements as the Waldensians or the Apostolic Brethren. Theirs was an appeal to history that introduced a critical attitude toward the church as an institution in the sense that the church was no longer regarded as having existed the same for all time. Instead of an ongoing continuity between the earliest church and the present hierarchy, there had been a break and a subsequent decline.[15] This approach to history and the primitivistic ideal of a "return" to the apostolic faith will become one of the main weapons in countering papal claims to legitimacy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But for the time being, this view, employed as a critical perspective of ecclesial reform, was not a call to reject the traditions or the essential structure of the Roman church. It was rather an attack upon deviations from the true Tradition of the primitive church, which was to be found in Scripture. For such thinkers with Franciscan ideals, such as Peter John Olivi, the Roman church may have been identified as the "carnal church," or "Babylon," or the reigning pope associated (in

14. Christians living in this period were convinced that they were living in an age of reform. See Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

15. G. Leff, "The Making of the Myth of a True Church in the later Middle Ages," *Catholic Historical Review* 68 (1968): 1-2.

varying degrees) with the Antichrist,[16] yet his apocalyptic images of a future apostolic church still included a pope at its head, albeit in an idealized form. Even Peter Waldo and his disciples (Waldensians) were from the very beginning bound by the traditional concepts of the church, despite their autonomy through the creation of independent worshiping communities. Their intent only was "to give greater space within the true church to the hearing of the Gospel, and this they initially had wanted to do within the body of the Roman church."[17] However much the papacy had polluted itself, the church was for the Waldensians, as it was for Hussites, the Roman church, whose sacerdotal hierarchy continued to communicate, if only in muted ways, the ancient faith of the apostles and the Fathers.

It remains to be seen why so many medieval sources traced the reasons for the moral and spiritual decadence of the church back to the accession of Constantine in the fourth century. One can find, for instance, in the opinions of John Wycliffe (c. 1325–1384) and John Hus (1369–1415) that the church's glad adoption of Constantine's patronage was perceived as the beginning of its degeneration from its original apostolic character, involving the accretion of unbiblical practices and the desire for temporal power. But exactly how the Constantinian era was considered a chief accessory to the downfall of the church's purity and the rise of Roman papal supremacy has, in fact, only partly to do with the fourth century. Instead, it was fueled in large part by the pervasive influence of an eighth-century decretal that came to be inserted in canon law known as the *Donation of Constantine*.[18] It was one of the greatest literary hoaxes of the Middle Ages.

The fascinating story behind this document begins with a legend that was already circulating about Sylvester (the *Life of Sylvester*), who became bishop of Rome in 314. At that time, Constantine was said still to be a worshiper of pagan idols and was persecuting Christians in the city. For his wickedness against God's people, the emperor contracts an incurable case of leprosy. He is advised by pagan priests to wash himself in the blood of three thousand infants, but cannot not bring himself to kill so many hapless innocents. Because of his clemency, Constantine is directed by a

16. *Ibid.*, 7-9.

17. A. Molnar, *A Challenge to Constantinianism: The Waldensian Theology in the Middle Ages* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1976), 43.

18. For the most comprehensive survey of the Sylvester legend and the *Donation*, see J. J. Ign. von Döllenger, *Fables Respecting the Popes of the Middles Ages*, trans. A. Plummer (London: Rivingtons, 1871).

heavenly vision to send for Sylvester, who had gone into hiding with his clergy during the persecution. The Roman bishop arrives, converting the emperor to Christianity, and heals his leprosy through the washing of baptism, whereupon the whole of Rome, senate and people, believe in Christ.

This legendary account was then later utilized in a public decree attributed to the emperor Constantine which he supposedly issued four days after his baptism. An unknown party sometime in the middle of the eighth century took the *Life of Sylvester* and turned it into the occasion by which Constantine, as a reward for healing him from leprosy, granted to Sylvester of Rome and his successors a number of comprehensive ecclesiastical and political rights.[19] The more significant of these privileges granted to the "Chair of Peter" and its successors was the imperial Lateran Palace in Rome (wherein Constantine was supposely baptized), sovereignty over the city of Rome, the provinces, cities and towns of the whole of Italy and the West; and most all, supreme authority over all churches in the world, including the chairs of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Constantinople. The *Donation* was, in effect, a sweeping bow to the authority of the papacy, in realms both sacred and secular. Whereas attributing to the bishop of Rome religious and civic jurisdiction had nothing to do with the historic Constantine or the realities of the fourth-century episcopacy, it had everything to do with reinforcing early medieval Roman papal theory that governing the empire ought ultimately to rest with the head of the church.[20] So Constantine is said to have conferred upon Sylvester the symbols of the empire — the diadem, the purple robe, and the scepter.

Whether Owen Chadwick is correct in thinking, "The forger [of the *Donation*] must have known that to make the pope into the king of Spain, France, the Rhineland and Britain was a wild dream,"[21] is beside the point. Its influence during the Middle Ages and into the sixteenth century was extensively felt. That the *Donation* and its legend did not square with any known historical details always troubled some of the more astute.[22] Never-

19. "Edictum Domini Constantini Imperatoris," *Patrologiae Latinae* CXXX. 245A-252B (first incorporated in what is called the Pseudo-Isidorian decretals about A.D. 850). Extracts from it are later found in most medieval collections of canon law that governed ecclesiastical and social life, but in whole form in the *Decree of Gratian*. The *Donation* is found in part 1, division 96, chaps. 13-14 of the *Decree of Gratian*.

20. W. Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A Study in the Ideological Relation of Clerical to Lay Power* (London: Methuen, 1970), 416-17.

21. Owen Chadwick, *A History of Christianity* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), 60.

theless, the story appears ubiquitously in the literature of the Middle Ages, most prominently in the biographical account of Sylvester in the *Liber Pontificalis (Book of the Popes),*[23] and in the extremely popular *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine.[24]

Though many were prepared to grant the historicity of the *Donation,* its grim implications for the amalgamation of the church with secular power and wealth were all too apparent. One can hear echoes of its fateful consequences in canto 19 of Dante's *Inferno:*

> Ah Constantine, what evil marked the hour —
> not of your conversion, but of the fee
> the first rich Father took from your dower!

Strong papal supporters, like Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century, acknowledged that the moral decadence afflicting Christianity should be traced back to the *Donation.*[25] For the Waldensians, the moment of the church's spiral into decadence occurred at the beginning of the fourth century when Pope Sylvester and Constantine made themselves the architects of a pseudo-Christian unity of the world. Wycliffe too, in his *De ecclesia,* repudiates papal authority and the entire papal system on the grounds of having been founded by Constantine and not Christ.[26]

Despite the published findings of the Italian humanist Lorenzo

22. Constantine never had leprosy, nor did he persecute Christians before his "conversion," which was in 312 — two years before Sylvester became bishop! Nor was Constantine baptized in Rome by Sylvester, but in Nicomedia in 337 by an "Arian" bishop of that city, Eusebius. The real irony of the legend is that Sylvester made little or no lasting impact on the church or on the papcy itself. "Indeed," says Richard McBrien, "it is what he did not do as pope that is more significant than what he did do." *Lives of the Popes: The Pontiffs from St. Peter to John Paul II* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 57.

23. L. Duchesne, ed., *Liber Pontificalis,* vol. 1 (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1955), 170-87. It may be that this account is based partly upon the "sixth ecumenical" council of 680 which knows of the *Life of Sylvester* and expressly asserted that the Council of Nicaea was summoned by the Emperor Constantine and Pope Sylvester.

24. A narration of saints' legends organized according to the church calendar year, probably completed in 1260. Of the seven laws that Constantine supposedly issued as a result of his healing by Sylvester, the fourth was that "as the emperor is the ruler of the world, so the Pope of Rome should be the ruler of all the other bishops."

25. M. D. Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle* (Paris, 1957), 81.

26. Of his "Forty-Five Articles" (condemned on 10 July 1412), article 33 reads: "Silvester papa et Constantinus imperator erraverunt ecclesiam dotando" ("Through his endowment, Pope Sylvester and the emperor Constantine led the church astray").

Valla[27] in 1440 which showed that the *Donation* was a complete forgery and fraud, the momentum of eight hundred years of ecclesiastical custom was not so easily dismissed. A century later, Calvin was still obliged to refute the validity of the *Donation* against its supporters (*Institutes,* IV.11.12). The eminent Roman Catholic historians Bellarmine and Baronius would continue to credit the story with historical respectability for obvious reasons, though by the end of the Enlightenment its illegitimate nature had been sufficiently unveiled so that there could no longer be any doubt about its spuriousness. Nevertheless, permanent historical "damage" had been done: the reactionary basis of many reform movements was built upon an image of post-Constantinian Christianity that had been partly or largely informed by a distorted view of the fourth century and beyond. A dividing line was drawn between the true apostolic faith and the false hierarchy that had arisen as a later mutation, between the church of Jesus Christ and the one forged from the human power and traditions incarnated as the Roman institution. Such an image only served to exacerbate the abuses of ecclesiastical power and practices which were truly present in the medieval church and required reform.

As far as many Anabaptist reformers were concerned, what had happened to the church under Constantine began a chronicle of mounting apostasy in which Christianity stood in need of radical revision or restitution. Melchior Hoffman (c. 1530), who was also probably influenced by the eschatology of Franciscan spirituality,[28] construed his church history in seven periods, each represented by the seven churches in Revelation 2–3. The first church, that of Ephesus, is designated as the time of the apostles, and then Smyrna is the "church of the martyrs," referring to the persecuted

27. See C. B. Coleman, *The Treatise of Lorenzo Valla on the Donation of Constantine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922). Valla knew only too well the ecclesiastical repercussions that his accusations would have, as he himself says in the preface, "For I am writing against not only the dead, but the living also, not this man or that, but a host, not merely private individuals, but the authorities. And what authorities! Even the supreme Pontiff himself. . . ." Cf. R. Fubini, "Humanism and Truth: Valla Writes against the Donation of Constantine," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57 (1996): 79-86.

28. Most notably, the *Readings on the Apocalypse* of Peter John Olivi (1248-1298) and the apocalyptic interpretations of Joachim of Fiore. See W. O. Packull, "A Reinterpretation of Melchior Hoffmann's Exposition against the Background of Spiritualist Franciscan Eschatology with Special Reference to Peter John Olivi," in *The Dutch Dissenters: A Critical Companion to Their History and Ideas,* ed. I. B. Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 49-50.

church of the second and third centuries. The church of Pergamon (Rev. 2:12-17), however, is symbolic of the reprobate church and the beginning of the church's degeneration. Hoffmann saw particularly the Constantinian legacy as the cause of spiritual decline. He seems to know of the *Donation of Constantine,* which of course he accepts as genuine, and is perceived as the link between pagan Rome and the anti-Christian papal church.[29] It is on account of this link that the Roman church arose and brought about the degeneration of the church through its acceptance of celibacy, replacement of the Lord's Supper with the Mass, and the introduction of infant baptism.

The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren (an Anabaptist account begun in the late 1560s) pinpoints the moment when the early church moved from its apostolic origins as the suffering church to the Roman church:

> Sylvester testified to Constantine the Great, the forty-third emperor, and won him over with many flattering words, accepting him as a Christian through baptism. . . . Here the pestilence of deceit that stalks in darkness and the plague that destroys at midday swept in with force, abolished the cross, and forged it into the sword. All this happened through the old serpent's deceit.[30]

The unfolding of history was accordingly molded to this pattern. Roman bishops gained absolute power over the rest of the churches and over kings, and whoever spoke out against them was condemned as a heretic and put to the sword. Such misalignment of the original apostolic initiative thanks to post-Constantinian Christianity called for a radical reevaluation of the concept of the church of Jesus Christ.

Just as central to the conception of the fall of the church is the development of what I will call a counter-church history that insisted the post-apostolic corruption did not result in a total loss of the gospel witness, but was in fact preserved through movements peripheral to, and often persecuted by, the institution of the Roman church. If the Roman church had become the cause of discontinuity between the New Testament church and the time of the Reformers, then another means had to be located which insured that continuity.

29. *Ibid.,* 53.

30. *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* or *Das grosse Geschichtbuch der Hutterischen Brüder,* trans. and ed. by the Hutterian Brethren (Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Publishing House, 1987), 31. The *Chronicle* accuses the popes of throwing out the Holy Scriptures and using "the Papal decretals" as the basis of their authority.

It was this "rewriting" of sacred history that has come to define the identity of many Protestants and their view of history unto the present day.

Returning to *The Chronicle,* those who were considered heretical by the church are depicted as dissenters of the Roman establishment by the very fact that opposition to Rome and the pope was itself a prototype of reformation. That the theology of these "dissenters" might be deemed heretical, or that no papacy existed in the fourth century, or that infant baptism was rarely practiced, is not taken into consideration. Such a philosophy of doctrinal (counter-)history provides very surprising results indeed! A third-century schismatic in Carthage named Donatus[31] is said to have taught and written against the pope as the greatest abomination. No less praiseworthy is the infamous Arius, whose views on the divine nature of Christ condemned at the Council of Nicaea (325)[32] are completely glossed over; he is called an "outstanding scholar" who "came forward to attack the Roman church for its errors. . . ."[33] Both of these men are honored for the fact that they rebaptized those who left the Roman church "with a true baptism," and that they were in turn reviled by the Pope. They are the forerunners of a long line of dissenters — Peter of Aragon, Dolcino of Novara, Peter Waldo, John Hus, John Wycliffe — wherein the light of truth had been preserved throughout the centuries before it was fully incarnated again within the churches of the Reformation. As one views the treatment of each of these figures, particularly the early patristic ones, it is apparent that the writer's agenda has completely overwhelmed the value of taking into account the historical and theological context in the task of interpreting church history.

31. "Donatism," taken from the name of Donatus, who was appointed bishop of Carthage by a dissident majority about 313, was a purist or rigorist movement within catholic Christianity. It refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of any bishop, or anyone ordained by such a bishop, who had surrendered the Scriptures *(traditor)* in times of persecution. Congenial to the stringent temperment of North African Christianity, Donatist churches often represented the majority in many towns, including Augustine's in Hippo. Whereas Donatists harbored more hostile attitudes toward the state, they were just as episcopally oriented as their "catholic" counterparts, affirming a succession of (Donatist) bishops from the apostle Peter.

32. Supposely citing fragments from his letters, the closing anathema of the Nicene Creed evidently wanted to shut out all theology related to Arius: "And those who say 'there was when he was not,' and 'Before his generation he was not,' and 'he came to be from nothing,' or those who pretend that the Son of God is 'of another *hypostasis* or substance,' or 'created,' or 'alterable,' or 'mutable,' the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes" *(Letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his Church).*

33. *The Chronicle,* 43.

A very similar course of interpretation was pursued by the widely read *Martyrs' Mirror*,[34] which was compiled in the seventeenth century in order to show how the Anabaptists, not the Roman church, were the true church and linked to the age of the apostles. It is a thesis of spiritual successionism. The introduction contends that a remnant of "Anabaptists, or those who maintain such a confession as they do, have existed through every century, from the days of Christ to the present time." Wholly circumventing the institutional church of history, the true church is that which has regularly exhibited two signs: believers' baptism and persecution for its profession of faith. A long line of personalities is chronicled from the first to the sixteenth centuries as proof of the antiquity of Anabaptist views — the apostles, Donatus of Carthage (who "was called an Anabaptist, and his followers, Anabaptists"), various Fathers of the fourth century,[35] The Poor of Lyons, Albigensians, Waldensians, John Hus, John Wycliffe, and others. Not interested in a theory of dissenters, *The Martyrs' Mirror* seeks to stress that continuity in each age from the time of the apostles until the present was secured through a succession of doctrine, namely the Anabaptist beliefs regarding congregationalism, believers' baptism, and participation in the suffering at the hands of the Romanists. More than any one writer of the Reformation, it was these historiographic-like renderings of the church's past that left the most enduring mark on fostering the "fall" paradigm.

The Autonomy of the Paradigm

It often happens that a characterization of a past event becomes more influential in its later reception than the historical occurrence itself. We are familiar with the typical fishing stories in which the catch grows larger

34. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Saviour, From the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660,* trans. J. F. Sohm (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1938).

35. Unlike Franck and the Hutterite Chronicle, *The Martyrs' Mirror* attempts to reclaim many of the patristic authorities by remolding, often drastically, their contributions in conformity with Anabaptist polity. Despite the fact that papalism is said to have commenced in the fourth century, Constantine is declared to have had a believers' baptism, and Sylvester is said to have been in agreement with Anabaptist perspectives on this point. It is important to note, however, that all of the chronicler's information about the earlier periods is second or thirdhand.

with each telling of the story. There is no question about how influential and utterly pervasive the "Constantinian fall" model of understanding church history has been in one form or another on subsequent Free Church identity. This is chiefly so because the model, which purported to originate from the ancient sources, came to acquire a dynamic existence of its own that served as an overriding hermeneutic for how one interprets those sources. Once the assumption was accepted as "historical," it was easily expanded and elaborated upon in subsequent years.

Succeeding interpretations of the church will regularly draw on the fall model and its correlative, a restitutionist sense of church history.[36] The Protestant Reformation, as a result, becomes construed not as a reform of what had come before (Catholicism), but as a retrieval of the apostolic "golden" era that either bypasses the intervening ages or so selectively chooses events and figures according to the restitutionist agenda that the effect is virtually the same. An even sharper dualism between the institutional ecclesiastical history and that of the church of true believers becomes promulgated.

Thus, the Pietist historian Gottfried Arnold (who subscribes and expands on the Hutterite thesis) taught in his *Impartial History of Church and Heresy* (1699)[37] that a radical redefinition of Christianity took place by the fourth century as powerful clerics came to believe that only they upheld the truth with the result that anyone who spoke against them, or their abuses, was branded as a heretic. Such heretics were the true believers who upheld the simplicity of Christ's teaching, and along with the persecution they suffer for standing against the ecclesiastical establishment, they show themselves to be authentic witnesses to the apostolic succession. This was the succession of the true church, fashioned and animated by the power of

36. Dennis Martin offers the following definition of "restitutionism": "It rejects traditional pre-modern history in order to restore 'true history' and locates 'true history' not in tradition or the mystery of the church but in a lost yet supposedly recoverable body of 'facts.' It assumes that one group or person can be closer than another (corrupted) group or person to the original Jesus or the true Jesus or the true Paul solely by studying the documents of the New Testament." "Nothing New Under the Sun? Mennonites and History," *Conrad Grebel Review* 5 (1987): 5.

37. *Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzer Historie vom Anfang des Neuen Testaments bis auf das Jahr Christi 1688* (Frankfurt am Main, 1699). I am indebted to Peter Erb's fine introductory discussion of Arnold in *Pietists: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983); and in his *Pietists, Protestants, and Mysticism: The Use of Late Medieval Spiritual Texts in the Work of Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714)* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1989).

the Spirit. In contrast, the bishops of the Constantinian corporation forged their theologies into narrow and stultifying definitions, building not on the Scripture, but on symbols and conciliar statements according to which all truth must be judged.

Reflective of the thesis in the *Martyrs' Mirror,* Free church historian Ludwig Keller developed his own successionist interpretation from the early church to the Reformation,[38] which in turn inspired Ernst Troeltsch to take up a dualistic rendering of church history in his magisterial *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1911). Likewise, Baptists have generally followed a similar pattern in accordance with one of their precursors, John Smythe, who repeatedly denied belief in an outward succession — i.e., popes, bishops, etc. — claiming that "there is no succession in the outward church, but that all succession is from heaven. . . ."[39] Continuity of faith resides in the succession of divine truth, not in the usual tokens of the institutional church. Although a predominant number of Baptist historians have taught (accurately) that the Puritan context of seventeenth-century England and Holland marks the origination of modern-day Baptists,[40] no less influential have been those who claim their lineage should be traced back across the centuries to New Testament times. According to this latter scenario, Baptists are not a species of Protestantism, but predate it, being found in every previous age since the apostles.

The popularity of this opinion was enhanced by the wide dissemination of a small booklet earlier this century by J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of*

38. Ludwig Keller, *Die Reformation und die älteren Reformparteien* (Leipzig, 1885). The origins of the Waldensians, who were the direct precursors of the Free Church, could be traced back to the Jesus and the apostles, and throughout the succeeding centuries, whenever those who opposed the policies of Pope Sylvester and Constantine were deemed heretics on that account. This approach was countenanced in the works of Eberhard Arnold (d. 1935), himself a member of the Bruderhof (Hutterian Brethren) in Germany.

39. Quoted in W. M. Patterson, *Baptist Successionism: A Critical View* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson Press, 1969), 15. Eventually, Smythe comes to the conclusion that the restitution of the church had been effected in the Mennonites with whom he joins. The practice of finding a remnant of true believers in each age of the church has been particularly favored by Baptist and Disciples of Christ historians. D. F. Durnbaugh, "Theories of Free Church Origins," The *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 41 (1968): 85f.

40. Robert Torbet, *History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1950); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987); William Brackney, *The Baptists* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988).

Blood Following the Christians Down through the Centuries.[41] Despite the fact that apostolic succession is discredited (as an episcopal institution), Baptists can point to an unbroken line of churches since Christ, identified chiefly through congregational polity, believers' baptism, separation from the state, and persecution — the "trail of blood." Corruption of the apostolic church commenced soon after the apostles as "the original democratic policy and government of the early churches" was eclipsed by the rise of the episcopal hierarchy and infant baptism. But it was when Constantine became a Christian emperor that the church was wedded to the Roman Empire and brought about an exchange of spiritual and temporal power.

> To effectually bring about and consummate this unholy union, a council was called. . . . The alliance was consummated. A Hierarchy was formed. In the organization of this Hierarchy, Christ was dethroned as head of the churches and Emperor Constantine enthroned (only temporarily however) as head of the church.[42]

This "hierarchy," whose development is signified by conciliar activity, is the beginning, according to Carroll, of the Catholic Church. It is important to note that the "council" mentioned above, presumably Nicaea, represents not biblical Christianity, but a compound of state and church, replacing the apostolic faith and charisms with legislative enactments. Those who refused to attend the ancient councils, thereby rejecting the marriage of the episcopacy with the imperium or any exaltation of a centralized government over the individual congregation, are described as "Baptists." In keeping with the successionist model, "Baptists" can be found, if not in name, in every age since the the apostolic era. Moreover, the number of dissenting groups that are identified as proto-Baptists was enlarged as the paradigm became a fix-

41. The full title of this book is worth noting: *The Trail of Blood Following Christians Down through the Centuries, or The History of Baptist Churches from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the Present Day* (Lexington: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931). Enclosed is a two-page chart which traces development of both the hierarchical or "Catholic" church and that of the true Christians from Christ to the present day.

This publication seems to be a twentieth-century popularization of the same theory put forth by an English Baptist minister, G. H. Orchard, *A Concise History of Baptists from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the Eighteenth Century* (Lexington: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1838), whose work was reissued in 1855 as *A Concise History of Foreign Baptists . . . from the Establishment of Christianity to the Present Age.*

42. *Trail of Blood,* 16.

ture in historical interpretation. Modern theorists identify groups from every epoch — Montantists, the so-called "Novations," Donatists, St. Patrick, the Bogomils, the Albigenses, the Lollards, the Waldensians and, of course, the Anabaptists — as doctrinal precursors.[43]

A nearly identical model is followed by the Independent Christian Church historian, James DeForest Murch, who argued that Rome's claim to supremacy was aided and abetted by the rise of Constantine to power. Just as the chief founder of the Disciples' (Christian Church) movement, Alexander Campbell, had opined in the previous century,[44] ecclesiastical hierarchy and organization were regarded as a substitute for the church's life in the Spirit. The move was a clear departure from New Testament Christianity.

> In self-defense came the first creeds, definitions of dogma and official norms for church teaching. The eventual tendency was for faith to be placed in doctrinal statements to such a degree as to obscure individual commitment to and communion with Christ. Men well versed in theology and church tradition came to occupy positions of prominence far beyond their local churches.[45]

Nevertheless, Murch declared, "The Free Church has had an unbroken existence in Christendom from the first Christian Church in Jerusalem, A.D. 30, to the present day."[46] Most noticeably — and strikingly reminiscent of

43. The enduring influence of Free Church successionism is demonstrable by the continued publications of historical refutations. Patterson, *Baptist Successionism;* J. E. McGoldrick, *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History* (Methuen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994).

44. "Spirituality and true charity amongst the leaders expired in the council of Nice [Nicaea], when the first creed received the imperial subscription." *The Christian Baptist,* 5.1 (6 August 1827): 7.

45. J. D. Murch, *The Free Church: A Treatise on Church Polity with Special Relevance to Doctrine and Practice in Christian Churches and Churches of Christ* (Louisville: Restoration Press, 1966), 29. To what degree Disciples' and Christian Church historians subscribe to Murch's scheme is impossible to determine at the present time, since there seems to be no prevailing attitude toward the applicability of the early church. The want of a "longer" view of church history within this Free Church tradition is obviously problematic.

46. *Ibid.,* 36. For successionist theology in the Plymouth Brethren and Seventh-Day Adventism, see respectively, E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1931); Ellen White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1911).

Arnold's approach — the links in this "unbroken" chain of existence are drawn from heretical groups: Montanists, Marcionites, Priscillians, and so on, all on the (mistaken) basis of their congregational polity and persecuted status. Virtually no heed is given to the respective historical contexts of these earlier groups as they are liberally drafted into the Free Church paradigm. Certainly no self-respecting biblical scholar would allow Old or New Testament texts to be treated in such a fashion!

William Patterson's critique of the successionist model is not overstated when he argues that such theories show an excessive use of and dependence on secondary sources,[47] and, exhibiting little knowledge of the primary works themselves, utilize past groups or associations with no regard to historical context in order to suit their presuppositions. As the secondary sources cited become unquestioned authorities, a facade of "historical" evidence is established that acts as proof for the fall of the church and successionist theses. That these theses are dependent on or derived from a paradigm seems not to be noticed. Another way to say this is that the paradigm has become self-evident enough that testing it against the original sources for validity is no longer necessary. In either case, the fall paradigm has acquired the power of its own authentication which remains active to this present day.

Rival Versions of the Past

An important motivation in the promulgation of the paradigm is revealed when we acknowledge that it evolved largely as a Protestant polemical device. As a central feature of the anti-Roman Catholic theological arsenal, the "fall" and "restitution" of the church became an indigenous part of Protestant historiography that was preserved and augmented over the cen-

47. Patterson, *Baptist Successionism,* 24. If anyone should complain about my use of less contemporary sources to define Free Church attitudes toward early church history (e.g., Carroll, Murch, etc.), I would simply reply that they are symptomatic of a general state of affairs that continues to govern Free Church self-perception when viewing history and theology. There are signs of an awakening to the seminal role which the early church plays in the fashioning of the Free Church identity; see the forthcoming collection of essays, *The Free Church and the Early Church: Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide,* ed. D. H. Williams. Nevertheless, the usual absence of integration with the patristic sources and early church history within the communitarian life of most Free churches, tells us that we have a long way to go.

turies. In other words, the idea of church renewal through a revival of patristic scholarship, outside of Christian humanist circles, was rapidly polarized into "Protestant" and "Roman Catholic," each side claiming descent from the apostolic church as the notion of the church's reformation became translated into rival versions of the past.

In a fascinating book entitled *Drudgery Divine,* Jonathan Z. Smith shows how much the appeal to Christian origins in the post-Reformation period was transformed into a matter of Protestant anti-Catholic apologetics. The working assumption for Protestant scholarship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that pernicious doctrines, philosophies and practices had crept their way into the primitive gospel of Jesus which had become thus transmuted, incarnate as the Roman church, or for that matter, as any highly organized form of religion. As Smith explains,

> The German reformation is imperfectly described as an appeal to scripture versus tradition. It was rather an appeal to history. The discovery had been made that the church, as it existed, was an institution which no longer corresponded to its original, that it was a corrupted, degraded, perverted institution. The appeal to scripture was not itself the moving spring of the reformation, it was the consequence of the sense of decay and degeneracy. As the doctrine of the fall of man was the key of human, so the doctrine of the corruption of the church was the key of ecclesiastical history.[48]

We have already seen a similar principle at work in *The Martyrs' Mirror,* a prime example of the ideological forces that were shaping Free church historiography. This lengthy document is much more than a chronicle of martyrs of the true faith. It is an attempt to rewrite church history in acccordance with the original marks of the true church of Jesus Christ in contrast to the origins which marked the institutional church of Roman Catholicism or other Protestant groups. Such revisionist history was not unique to Anabaptists. Various reconstructions became endemic to the early development of Protestant historiography, especially as charges of novelty were inveighed against Protestants by Roman Catholics. One

48. *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 73, quoted from M. Pattison, *Isaac Casaubon: 1559-1614,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), 322.

can see these forces at work in John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (1554),[49] the first English attempt to establish the continuity of a proto-Protestant piety from apostolic times to the Reformation. His point in reviewing the cases of hundreds of believers who suffered for their opposition to a corrupt church was both to show Roman Catholicism's ecclesial degradation and to trace a succession of pre-Protestant groups, most notably the Albigensians and Waldensians, whose faithfulness throughout the centuries provided an alternative link to the apostolic church.[50] The seventeenth-century Puritans/Dissenters also condemned most of church history as anti-Christian popery, given that the church's hierarchy had precipitously fallen into spiritual decline ever since Constantine. Origins of the true church had to be found elsewhere. A succession, not of bishops, but of pre-Protestant dissenters whose origins stretched back before Constantine was the means of establishing the Puritan claim to antiquity.

In what was the earliest constructed Lutheran history of the Reformation, the *Ecclesiastica Historia* (1574), supervised by Matthias Flacius Illyricus (later called the *Magdeburg Centuries* from its third edition in 1757 because of its treatment of each century of church history as a discrete unit),[51] maintained that by the beginning of the second century the church had begun already to fall away from the apostolic truth in her constitution and in specific doctrinal elements, what he calls the *mysterium iniquitatis,* the first phase of Catholicism (II.109). But not until the fourth century, namely, the alliance with the Roman Empire via Constantine and his successors, did the church witness the rise of rituals and ceremonies that were borrowed more from paganism than from the New Testament. The tone of the entries is overtly polemical, its intent being to refute Roman Catholic claims to authenticity and to show that Lutheranism is a return to the apostolic faith.

It is a recurring theme that can be found in numerous translations of the early Fathers published by Protestants. This is not the place to catalogue

49. The full title is *Actes and Monuments of these latter and perilous days touching matters of the Church, wherein are comprehended and described the great persecutions & horrible troubles, that have bene wrought and practised by the Romishe Prelates,* or popularly known as the *Book of Martyrs.* The first English edition was published in 1563.

50. S. J. Barnett, "Where Was Your Church before Luther? Claims for the Antiquity of Protestantism Examined," *Church History* 68 (1999): 15-16.

51. For an insightful commentary on the historical reconstruction of the *Historia,* see Auguste Jundt, *Les Centuries de Magdebourg, ou la Renaissance de l'Historiographie Ecclesiastique au Seizième Siècle* (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1883).

the variety and distinctions of works produced, apart from mentioning by way of example Wolfgang Musculus's 1540 Latin translation of Basil of Caesarea's *Ascetica magna,* which sought to show that the Cappadocian was a direct precursor of the Reformation, or Théodore Béze's 1570 Greek-Latin edition of *The Five Dialogues on the Holy Trinity* (which he wrongly attributed to Athanasius), arguing that the trinitarian teaching of the Reformers is more in line with that of Athanasius.[52] It is clear enough that the writing of church history or translations of texts during this time was very often prompted by confessional aims that fueled contemporary disputations, among both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Whether such interests in the early church were driven by an aim to recapture the "golden age" of theology or as means of reforming the present church mattered little in the overall quest on all sides to claim sole continuity with New Testament Christianity in the face of longstanding corruption.

Some Implications

There is no question that the above perspectives on the "Constantinian fall" of Christianity have percolated their way into contemporary theological thinking for different reasons and in different ways, scholarly and popular, with examples too numerous to count. Jürgen Moltmann draws on the paradigm when he cites the beginning of the Constantinian era as the Christian church taking over the role of political religion, i.e., a delimiting of the church to the political order of the Roman Empire.[53] Likewise,

52. Irena Backus, "Some Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Translations of Basil of Caesarea and Justin Martyr," *Studia Patristica* 18. 4 (1990): 305-21.

53. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978). In this book, Moltmann exalts the church polity of congregationalism as that which best fulfills the Reformation's idea of universal priesthood. All the internal structures of the church exists for the sake of the congregation. However, he says, "[w]ith the christianization of the Roman empire the church sacrificed its peculiar and visible form as the congregation. Thus the church was no longer formed through voluntary and independent congregations, but belonging to regions, zones, parochial territories, provincial churches, cultural churches, and national churches" (like the German national church which he criticizes) (121). Moreover, the separation of the clergy from the laity became final; faith was practiced by participating in public events; instead of the sacraments being celebrated by the believing community, they became official acts of the priests; diakonia was dissolved into the state's general welfare system, and with this the church also lost its mission (122).

Malcolm Muggeridge makes the distinction between Christianity and "Christendom": "Christendom began with the emperor Constantine. Christianity began with the Incarnation."[54] Thus Christendom, a calcified and politicized version of God's original work, came about in the fourth century through an absorption of Christianity into the state.

No less has Stanley Hauerwas, an ethicist working from a Methodist background (who has referred to himself as a "high-church Mennonite"), incorporated the Constantinian paradigm into his thought as a means of criticizing contemporary Western culture, especially American Protestantism. Like those ancient Christians who associated the Roman Empire with the kingdom of God, so have many American Christians conflated the democratic and capitalist policies of their country with the plan of God's salvation.[55] Any time the church and its theological identity become interwoven with the ideology of the system or state, Hauerwas argues, we have an instance of "Constantinian Christianity." This occurs whenever Christian universality has been embodied in Western civilization or the state, and not in the church. "The church thus no longer signified an identifiable people, but came to mean primarily the hierarchy and sacramental institution."[56] Instead, Hauerwas claims, the church is meant to be a colony of resident aliens, functioning as a contrasting society or *polis,*[57] where the best interests of the church do not coincide with those of the state.

None of my observations thus far are meant to deny that the structure of the Christian faith was deeply impacted by the end of the fourth century as it moved from being a marginal sect to the primary religion of the Roman Empire by the time of Theodosius I (379–395). It is also obvious that Constantinianism has come to mean much more than the series of events that played themselves out during the fourth century. I quite agree with the criticism that the temptation of the church in seeking to identify its mission and the meaning of its history with the function of the state in any age or culture is a chronic problem that Christians have had to confront in their

54. Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 14.

55. "What Could it Mean for the Church to Be Christ's Body?" in *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 58.

56. A. Rasmusson, *The Church as "Polis": From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 222.

57. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 69ff.

calling to "go into all the world and make disciples" (Matt. 28:19). The great irony in the success of christianizing any society is that the faithful must inevitably wrestle with Jesus' claim that his kingdom is not of this world. For the church's unity with the host culture results in the church's loss of self-identity and ability to speak prophetically to that culture.

It may be that a limited version of Constantinianism is a useful model for moral theology and for confronting the gnawing questions about the changing role of the church in contemporary society.[58] As a Baptist whose heritage is committed to maintaining a separation of church and state, I certainly have no quarrel with this. But then, as Hauerwas has rightly put it, "Constantinianism is a 'given,'"[59] which is precisely the difficulty. What exactly are Christians renouncing if they renounce Constantinianism? The fact that Constantianism has been historically connected with the "fall" of the church has meant for most Free Church Protestantism much more than a problem of political theology; it has served as the grounds rather for an abdication — tacitly or explicitly — from the theological and spiritual history of the post-apostolic church. The Constantinian model has come to indict all of fourth-century Christianity and subsequent ages as seriously flawed and having abandoned their biblical moorings. Those who would walk the path of Christian faithfulness must therefore go around it to stay on the path.

One of the strongest cases for the problematic nature of Constantinianism and its alien legacy in comparison to biblical Christanity has been made by the late John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite scholar, whose work has definitively shaped the direction of Free Church studies in this century. On one hand, Yoder does not identify with the kind of restitutionism that traces the true church through a series of covert links with martyrs or dissenters. The temptation of this counter-historiography is "to imagine genetic connections where there were none, thus short-changing the study of proximate real causes."[60] Another problem is to assume all suffering dissenters agreed on all points; they did not, including infant baptism. But more fundamentally, Yoder criticizes the ahistorical

58. See, as another example of this, Loren Mead's *The Once and Future Church* (New York: The Alban Institute, 1991).

59. *Ibid.*, 231. The fall paradigm is functional but not in the polemical, anti-Catholic sense for Hauerwas, who prizes his Methodist heritage as "the rediscovery of the Catholic substance of John and Charles Wesley."

60. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 133.

nature of restitutionism: "If it is not the public institutional succession which accredits the faithfulness of the mainstream church, then why should it be a clandestine institutional succession which accredits the faithful church?" Any skirting of the church's whole history shuts the door on responsible criticism. In order to be able to offer any revisionist alternative to church history, one must be history oriented. A dualistic perspective of the church's history cannot suffice.

On the other hand, Yoder identifies the "fall" of the New Testament church with what he calls the "Constantinian shift," that great negative watershed in Christian history which turned the church from a critical, prophetic and suffering minority to its new role as legitimator of power, wealth and hierarchy. To put it simply, the gospel norm — the story and claims of Christ — was betrayed in the Constantinian era when the fourth-century "fall" produced a new ecclesiology and concomitantly, a reversal in Christian ethics. Imperial values and social and legal structures came to be identified with Christianity, "the Constantinian wedding of piety and power," so as to create a Christian Roman Empire. Before Constantine, violence and coercion were morally abhorrent; after Constantine, there was a growing acceptance of imperial violence as a Christian duty, to the point of repressing other Christian groups deemed heretical. What the church accepted in the Constantinian shift is what Jesus had rejected, moving from Golgotha to the battlefield. Yoder's own position in defense of Christian pacifism is most apparent in his arguments here.

In this new ecclesiology, the lines between state and the church were no longer clear; Roman society was the church at large. There was no way to clearly distinguish the true church anymore. The very meaning of the word "Christian" was altered: its earliest moral and intellectual meanings were reversed through sociological and political pressures. This had profound implications for the church's internal structure:

> The definitions of the faith could thus no longer take the assembly of believers as its base. As a result, therefore, the eyes of those looking for the church had to turn to the clergy, especially to the episcopacy, and henceforth, "the church" meant the hierarchy more than the people.[61]

"Constantinianism" is, therefore, directly related to the rise of the church as a hierarchical institution and the eclipsing of congregational polity. In

61. Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, 136.

effect, a contemporary political-social agenda took over the development of doctrine from the believing and confessing churches.

As its identity was transformed, there was likewise an impact on the church's doctrine as expressed in the major formulas of faith. In a commentary on Yoder's perspective of the fourth-century church, A. J. Reimer claims that it is not entirely clear whether Yoder considers the Constantinian shift and trinitarian orthodoxy as defined at the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) to be part of the same movement, though the general trend in Yoder's thought is that the two are intrinsically linked together. The Apostles' Creed, for example, which was already in place by the third century, is perceived as a deviation from the biblical narrative since its lacks specific allusions to the life and teachings of Jesus: a kind of "leap" is made from birth to the crucifixion. Nor is there a sense of urgency to call people to repentance and seek forgiveness of sins, despite the fact that the creed affirms Christian belief in the "forgiveness of sins." "Instead," says Reimer, "there is reflected in the creed the beginnings of the sacramentalism and metaphysical speculation so prevalent in the medieval church with the Catholic church itself becoming an object of belief."[62]

Although there are many nuances in the constructions of Yoder's thought that cannot be presented here, it is accurate to say that the basic structure of the fall paradigm is being asserted with full rigor: Anabaptist Christianity restored the normative state of the church as found in the New Testament which had been obscured in the clouds of authoritarianism and politico-doctrinal manipulation since Constantine. Despite Yoder's justifiable protestations against the validation of counter-church histories, one is nevertheless encouraged to jump from the New Testament over centuries of a corrupt establishment to find radical renewal in the sixteenth century. This is not unlike Harold Bender's famous essay, "The Anabaptist Vision," wherein he also rejected spiritual successionism. Anabaptism is depicted as the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, and is therefore a recreation without compromise of the New Testament church and the vision of Christ and the apostles. It is preferable, Bender claimed, to make a radical

62. A. James Reimer, "Trinitarian Orthodoxy, Constantinianism, and Theology from a Radical Protestant Perspective," in *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives of the Affirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century*, ed. S. M. Heim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 136-37.

break with 1500 years of church history and culture than to break with the New Testament.[63]

Repercussions and Implications

Now we must return to the question I asked in the beginning of this chapter. Did a breach occur in the ways by which the faith was defined and defended in the fourth century and afterwards? Do we find the ecclesial vitality of apostolic Christianity and its proclamation of the evangelical truth increasingly abandoned or even repressed in the centuries that immediately followed? As we have seen, Free Church Protestantism, despite a lack of uniformity in its doctrines and historical developments, answers these questions with a story of the church that is primarily negative. It is a story of increasing degeneration that has served to devalue theological formation between the end of the apostolic age and the Reformation. In particular, the later (patristic) Tradition becomes suspected of superimposing alien interpretations on the simple biblical revelation, replacing the straightforward narrative of Jesus' life and death with credal formulas politically motivated, producing an elitist type of theology. The result is that the christological and trinitarian formulations which became Christian orthodoxy are thought to reflect the power structures and understanding of the Constantinian church instead of a Christian one.[64] As creeds, liturgies, dogmas, and ecclesiastical offices became the antitheses of the apostolic era, the external or "Catholic" church obscured the means by which the true faith was transmitted to succeeding generations of believers. And thus, the fall paradigm is complete.

In a highly tendentious interpretation of the Constantinian era, Alistair Kee unequivocally argues that Constantine was never really a "believer" and his alleged conversion meant that the church's values were substituted for Constantine's, which were governed by a political ideology of power and wealth. The church simply became incorporated into the imperial plan and became an instrument in the unification of the empire. "The values of the historical Jesus are now replaced by the values of Constantine," and thus,

63. Harold Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Edward G. Hershberger (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1957), 37-41.

64. For other examples of the Constantinian "fall" and restitutionism, see G. J. Heering, *The Fall of Christianity* (New York: Fellowship Publications, 1943); Henry Townsend, *The Claims of the Free Churches* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949).

> He [Constantine] conquered the Christian church. The conquest was complete, extending over doctrine, liturgy, art and architecture, comity, ethos and ethics. And this is the greatest irony, that Constantine achieved by his kindness what his predecessors had not been able to achieve by force. Without a threat or a blow, and all unsuspecting, the Christians were led into captivity and their religion transformed into a new imperial cult.[65]

Once the driving forces of the Christian Roman empire became transformed into the politics of power, the formulation of Christian doctrine and ethics would swiftly mirror its environment. The very mechanism of church councils and decisions made by enclaved bishops bespeaks the secularization of the church's organization. Both doctrine and practice were becoming polluted, since the church was moving away from its New Testamental and sub-apostolic origins. This meant that the major creeds of the fourth century, the Nicene and the Constantinopolitan (381), and Chalcedon (451) in the fifth, could be seen as symptomatic expressions of the corrupt legacy of Constantine, and therefore not relevant to the task defining orthodox Christianity.

Such a perspective casts a dark shadow on the origination of doctrinal creeds and is translated as a general suspicion about creeds in general. It is hardly surprising that those denominations which are part of the historic Free church consider themselves anticredal — "no creed but Christ" — cleaving only to the Bible and the working of the Spirit.[66] Since ancient creeds are a reflection of the rejected hierarchical and imperial institution, they are held of little account when it comes to marking the road of orthodox belief. Whereas they may function implicitly in marking the parameters of theological orthodoxy, as does the Nicene Creed, they are also perceived as manifestations of the political and social changes within the church that had come upon Christianity in the fourth century. That

65. Alistair Kee, *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology* (London: SCM Press, 1982), 154.

66. E. Glenn Hinson, one of a handful of patristic scholars writing today from a Baptist perspective, has shown that despite Baptists' disavowal of creeds and doctrinal formulae, they have in fact historically affirmed their faith through "confessions," and that these statements have acted as succinct summaries of the Christian essentials. "Creeds and Christian Unity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23 (1986): 25-36. From a Mennonite perspective with the same aim, see Howard Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith* (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985).

such creeds are used at all, or at least thought of as a doctrinal baseline, has more to do with the fact that such confessions were valued by the Reformers rather than with the historical pertinence of the patristic era in itself.

More important for our present task, however, is the tendency of the paradigm (intentionally or not) to discredit or minimize the value of the late patristic era as normative in defining the true faith. Again, the staggering irony of this position is that most evangelicals subscribe to a Nicene-Constantinopolitan Trinity and a Chalcedonian Christology, and read their Bibles with these theological "lenses" as the truth. The Tradition articulated in this era is nevertheless perceived in practice as discontinuous with either the apostolic age or the first three centuries. It only stands to reason that the ecclesial establishment (e.g., "hierarchy") and the deposit of faith formulated in the later patristic period must be completely subordinated to a biblical notion of the church and its faith, and in some instances, even repented of.

Despite the ostensible care and attention given to doctrine and history by evangelical scholarship, the long term effects of the fall of the church paradigm have caused a compartmentalization of church history in very select and ahistorical ways. By discounting the intrinsic theological value of the fourth century and beyond, the only "real" history that counts is a truth-only or a spiritual successionism that has come to typify the history of evangelical theology and biblical exegesis. One may hear occasional appeals to the Nicene or Apostles' Creeds; nevertheless, the doctrinal history and theological architects of Christianity in the Constantinian era are not essential parts of today's preaching and teaching. As indirect as it may seem for today, I maintain that the fall paradigm (with or without Constantine) has been functionally discreet and highly successful in preventing evangelicals from claiming the foundational centuries of the faith as their own.

What this means is that the heritage of the ancient Tradition has been sufficiently discounted such that the training of pastors and scholars in many Protestant institutions receive minimal, if any, exposure to it. Making room for courses in historical theology in most seminaries is difficult enough as it is, with general surveys and denominational histories receiving the lion's share of available space. There are very few scholars from Free Church communions in the United States who are conversant with the literature of the Fathers, though the growing number of graduate students specializing in patristics would indicate that their number is on the rise.

Theologically speaking, the widest part of the rift in Free church thought, which presupposes that patristic (and medieval) theology was constructed along the lines of conformity with an imperial or hierarchical model rather than a biblical one, is that Scripture and Tradition are two different and conflicting authorities in the sense of being mutually exclusive of each other. The interpretation of the Tradition as a nonbiblical and purely human artifice designed to reinforce the institution of the episcopacy has deep roots within the Free Church mentality, as we have seen. If the goal of restoration is a return to the Bible or apostolic Christianity, then the Tradition of the church becomes not an ally in the process of restoration but an impediment as a byproduct of the church's "fall."

An Alternative Approach

At issue in this chapter is how the fall paradigm has been cultivated to the point of distorting the ecclesiastical and political forces which composed the fourth century in order to supply a stronger case for the church's need of radical restitution. Central to this distortion is how the conception of "Constantinianism" has operated to reduce the development of the early church's doctrine to an epiphenomenon of imperial politics. What is nearly or entirely ignored in this paradigm is the vitality and continuity of the worshiping and confessing church throughout the patristic era — including the period after Constantine. The faith professed and practiced in the early churches was not determined by the political machinations of emperors and episcopal hierarchies. The essential formulation and construction of the Christian identity was something that the fourth century *received* and continued to expand upon through its biblical exegesis and liturgical life as reflected in the credal Tradition. In other words, I am postulating that the continuity between the post-apostolic period and the kind of Christianity articulated in fourth and fifth centuries was more complex and durable than Free church typologies of ecclesiastical history have been willing to allow. Most criticisms of the Constantinianization of Christianity tend to draw their conclusions from a one-dimensional model that is so focused on how political-conciliar authority affected the whole that it ignores the multiple ways which Christian leaders and churches faithfully preserved doctrinal orthodoxy apart from, and sometimes in opposition to, prevailing imperial power. As with any century of Christian development, the historical evidence of the later patristic age is richer and less uniform than our models would indicate.

The negative regard with which too many in the Free Church have approached the pre-Reformation church has prevented them from seeing that Christ's promise to build his church and cause it to prevail against the "gates of Hell" (Matt. 16:18) pertains no less to this period of church history. This promise was meant not merely for evangelical churches! Christ is himself the head of his body which is the church (Eph. 4:16). This is the church which Christ loves and for which he gave himself up in order "to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:27). To understand these words in solely spiritualist or eschatalogical terms would do an injustice to the present sense of the passage, by refusing to see that Christ's establishing the church in holiness is a part of the process of every age since his ascension.

Declaring our faith in the "holy and catholic church" is just that: a statement of conviction that must be integrated with whatever view of the church's corruption we take. To claim that the church fell into near total apostacy, with the exception of a tiny remnant, from the time of Constantine until the Reformation strips these passages of their meaning and calls into question Christ's provision for his church, his bride. We may agree with the dangers of what the ethicists call "Constantinianism," and yet we ought to expect God's providential rule in the Roman Empire, visibly impacting his church through its strengths and weaknesses. What we choose to emphasize in church history should not be confused with the promised working of the Spirit in every age, or the lack thereof. As John Howard Yoder has rightfully observed, if apostasy was real, faithfulness must also be possible. In the next chapter, let us see how this faithfulness was at the same time preserved and transformed.