

Revivals And Church History :: Constantine and the institutionalization of church

Constantine and the institutionalization of church - posted by Oracio (), on: 2010/12/29 12:59

The following is a recent post from the blog of author Neil Cole:

My wife and I spent a couple days in York, England recently. While there we saw a statue to Constantine erected just beside the main cathedral in the area--the York Minster. While beautiful and impressive in many ways, we were reminded by the cathedral of how far from the original intent of the church people had taken her.

The early church was organic and a movement for the first couple hundred years. Driven underground by waves of Roman persecution, it remained a viral movement that could not be contained or stopped. Though many tried to stomp it out all attempts only made it stronger.

All that changed in 313 AD when the emperor Constantine declared that the empire would not only tolerate Christianity but restore to the church all lost property. He was the first "Christian" emperor and Christianity went instantly from the margins to the mainstream and everything changed. Christianity became the state religion and the church did not change much from that point on. Our enemy, the devil himself, learned that if he cannot stop the church, he might as well join it and change it from the inside so that it is ineffective and less a threat. But for occasional breakouts of remnant expressions he succeeded. He used Constantine to launch this sinister attack.

Over the centuries, after Constantine, the Western church has evolved in many ways, but none have been a significant systemic change. There was the establishment of both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church and for hundreds of years there were very little changes. The Reformation split the Western church into the Roman Church and the volatile protestant church. But as an institution, in spite of the differences, the institutional system remained mostly unchanged. The Anabaptists were set loose by the reformation (and persecuted by it) but quickly would institutionalize as well.

Whether the church adapts to reach coal miners in the 18th century England or postmodern pilgrims in the 21st century, most of the changes have been minor shifts. Whether you are talking about high church or low, Pentecostal or Presbyterian the church has remained institutional in its approach. From Baptist to Brethren, from Mennonite to Methodist, the changes in the system are relatively untouched over the centuries. Music or no music? Pipe organ or electric guitar? Tall ceilings with stained-glass windows or meeting in a box building without windows, the actual system of church has gone relatively unchanged.

You have the priests or pastors, the Sunday service with singing and a sermon, the weekly offering, the pulpit with pews and the church building. These have been constants since the fourth century. Even if you move the whole show into a house instead of a church building, if the system hasn't changed you have only shrunk the church, not transformed it. Changing the style of music does not upgrade the system. Turning down the lights and turning up the volume is a simple patch to the same old system. Choirs and hymns or praise bands and fog machines, kneeling or standing the system is changed very little. Sermonizing with topical messages or expositional ones is not changing the system just making minor adjustments. Sunday Schools or small groups as secondary learning environments are not a systemic change at all, just a variation on the same old operational system.

Constantine was declared Caesar while in York in 306 AD. Today, near the spot where he was named the emperor is a statue of him beside a large cathedral, which I find quite symbolic. Constantine turned the church into an institution and in that state it remained for 1700 years. He is now remembered beside a very institutional expression of what church is--the York Minster Cathedral. Today we are seeing a rapid shift back to organic and viral expressions of ecclesiology.

We should remember Constantine so as not to make the same mistake. We must begin to awaken once again to the true nature and expression of Christ's body, not as a building, a program, an event or an organization, but as a spiritual family called out on mission together. We must come to realize once again that the form of church is not the issue, but the way we relate--to God, one another and the world.