Religion and Power: A Deadly Combination

From the series: Good News Then and Now

Text: Amos 7:13; Romans 13:1; Matthew 15:18

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I initiated last week a series of messages that will bring us down to October 31, if we survive. That's Reformation Sunday, and it is the week prior to the first two weeks in November, which will be special events here. The West Shore Committee for Jewish Christian Dialogue will bring Amy-Jill Levine, who will speak here on Sunday morning. Her theme for the weekend is "When and Why Did Christianity and Judaism Separate?" Amy-Jill teaches at Vanderbilt Divinity School, New Testament, although she is a Jewish scholar. Then, John Shelby Spong, Episcopal Bishop of Newark, will be here the following week to talk about re-imagining Christian faith and "Why Christianity Must Change or Die." Those two weeks will be the bookends of this series of messages. Amy-Jill will tell us how it all got started, and Bishop Spong will suggest where it must be going and, in the meantime, prior to their coming, I hope that I can help you to understand that change and transformation has been the rule for 2000 years.

Often the Church would like to give the impression that it has a deposit of faith given once for all, that it is guarded down through the centuries untouched, but such is not the case. We started last week going back to the Apostolic community itself, recognizing the expression of that faith in the New Testament documents that give from beginning to end the impression that the whole of that Jesus movement was posited on the premise that Jesus would return as the Lord of glory very soon. The Gospels, the letters of Paul, the Revelation at the end of the book all give witness to the fact that there was an apocalyptic expectation, that is, that the heavens would open and that the Son of Man, the Son of God would appear to judge the living and the dead and bring to consummation all things, the imminent return of Jesus.

And, of course, it didn't happen, and it hasn't happened for 2000 years, and reflecting back on that, there is a growing awareness and recognition over the last century or so that it was that disappointed expectation that provided the womb out of which the whole Church as an institution developed in its organizational structure, in its liturgical forms, in its creedal formulations. How we are, how we live, how we believe is the consequence of that disillusion because of the delay of

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the *parousia*. The fact that Jesus did not return, that imminent expectation was shattered and, consequently, they found themselves in a world whose history was going on. They found themselves in a life that they had to learn how to live as followers of Jesus. It's all very understandable, all very normal, all very natural. But, it was a very great crisis, and out of that crisis we have the early emerging catholic tradition, catholic meaning simply universal, and that tradition in its early stages was full of conflict and tension, it was all over the board, it was very chaotic, as you can understand, everyone trying to make sense of that great event followed by the trauma of disappointment. What in the world is God doing? The early catholic tradition was the consequence of sorting all that through.

What I want to do this morning, and I can only do it briefly, I have a two-hour sermon here, but fortunately you only have ten minutes, so I have to give you huge chunks of stuff and you'll just have to take my word for it, although I could read to you all morning here. But I want this morning to suggest to you that, what appeared to be a very great providence - that this persecuted minority, this band of followers of Jesus became the established religion of the Roman Empire, and that establishment brought it great power, position, and prestige, and that which appeared to be such a blessing, as a matter of fact, was a great seduction which ended in the wedding of power and religion, so that for nearly 1000 years during the whole medieval development up to the eve of the Reformation, a Church in power became a very corrupt institution.

Religious leaders don't handle power any better than secular leaders. I think it was the British statesman, Lord Acton, who said, "All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," and what the Church became in the wake of that tremendous transformation, was an absolute institution. It was absolute in the control of salvation. It had the imperial sword to back up its claims and it is a chapter with dark shadows because the religion of Jesus, the servant, became the religion of a very dominant, prestigious institutional Church. I can't possibly document that for you this morning. Let me simply point to, for example, St. Augustine, who early on was still looking to the sky for Jesus to return, but then he lived into the 5th century; he lived long enough to experience the sack of Rome by the barbarians, the fall of Rome. He wrote the first Christian interpretation of history called *The City of God*, and Augustine moved from an expectation of Jesus to return anytime to an understanding of Church history as being the millennium for that 1000 years which is referred to in Revelation 20.

Now, I don't recommend you go home this afternoon and try to understand the Book of Revelation, nor the 20th chapter, but there's been a lot of "stuff" that's come out of the 20th chapter which would appear to be a thousand years of peace on earth ruled over by the Messiah who returns. There are some who think he'll return and take the Church out of history first. Those are pre-Millennialists. And there are some who think that he'll come only at the end of that thousand years, which was kind of Augustine's position, so post-Millennialist. The Reformers didn't know what in the world to do, so they became a-Millennialists, and of

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course, I've tended to become a pan-Millennialist, that is, living with the confidence that everything will "pan out" in the end. I recommend that.

But, Augustine made a move from expecting Jesus to return to dealing with the reality of the fact that history was moving, and of course, his idea of that millennium as the thousand years of Church history created all kinds of millennial fever as the year 1000 approached. Fully as much, maybe a bit more than we have today with all the Y2K hysteria. Augustine I point to simply as one for whom the reality of history, the reality of his human experience, forced him to adjust his understanding of that biblical story of the return and the reign of Jesus Christ on earth.

But, what really happened to the Church, and my point this morning, is that it was brought into a position of domination. I know you're familiar with the fact that the Emperor Constantine saw a sign in the sky and he believed it was the cross, and he heard a voice saying, "By this sign you will conquer," and he won the battle the next day at the Milvian Bridge in 312, and from that point on he converted to Christianity, although he wasn't baptized until near his death; he was hedging his bets. But, his successors established Christianity as the state religion and, in so doing, created a powerful institution whose history is not a nice story.

John Dominic Crossan, who was here in February, in his *Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography*, writes,

> Finally, about three hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus, ... the Roman Emperor Constantine, believing that victory over his imperial rival ... near the Milvian Bridge had been obtained by Christ's power, converted to Christianity. ...Constantine, wanting a unified Christianity as the empire's new religion, ordered the Christian bishops to meet, under imperial subsidy, in lakeside Nicea...

Obviously, resorts were popular then for conferences, as well. And Constantine had just one purpose and that was to rule out any theological differences. I imagine he said to the bishops, "Now, look boys, the accommodations are great, the food is wonderful, Happy Hour overflowing, I have only one concern - come out of there with a statement on which you can all agree. Eusebius, a historian of the times, is quoted by Crossan:

> Detachments of the bodyguard and troops surrounded the entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of them the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the Imperial apartments, in which some were the Emperor's companions at table, while others reclined on couches arranged on either side. One might have thought that a picture of Christ's kingdom was thus shadowed forth, and a dream rather than reality.

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But, Dom Crossan says,

> A Christian leader now writes a life of Constantine rather than Jesus. The meal and the kingdom still come together, but now the participants are the male bishops alone, and they recline, with the emperor himself, to be served by others. Dream or reality? Dream or nightmare?

It is, of course, an example of the dialectic just proposed between the historical Jesus and the confessional Christ, of peasant Jesus grasped now by imperial faith. Still, as one ponders that progress from open commensality with Jesus to episcopal banquet with Constantine, is it unfair to regret a progress that happened so fast and moved so swiftly, that was accepted so readily and criticized so lightly? Is it time now, or is it already too late, to conduct, religiously and theologically, ethically and morally, some basic cost accounting with Constantine?

It was the Constantinian establishment that brought the Church into a prominence and a dominance which eventuated in a decay and a corruption which brought about, eventually, a rending again of the body of Christ in the 16th century. The Church became the absolute institute of salvation.

There was total control over the lives of people. Clergy such as Peter and myself through the authority of the bishops, through the mediation of the pope, who was the vicar of Jesus Christ on earth, would hold you totally in our control. We held the spigot of grace. We could determine to whom to offer the sacrament, and it was only with the sacrament received that salvation was possible. Cyprian, the great bishop and his famous phrase in Latin translated outside the church? No salvation. It was an absolute institution, infallible and inerrant in all of its teaching and all its action. It could not be questioned.

Throughout that period there was even a struggle between the throne and the altar, the princes and the Church. And there was a period in which the Church dominated the secular powers, as well, until those secular powers eventually broke free and became dominant. The Church was an absolute institution and it dominated and it was its death.

The great historian, William Manchester, in his book, *A World Lit Only By Fire*, describes the eventuation of that Constantinian establishment and that absolutizing of the institutional form of religion in the Church at the eve of the Reformation. He writes,

> ... The center of the Ptolemaic universe [still the universe where the earth is the center of everything] was the known world - Europe, with the Holy Land and North Africa on the fringes. The sun moved round it every day. Heaven was above the immovable earth, somewhere in the overarching sky; hell seethed far beneath their feet. Kings rules at the pleasure of the

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> Almighty; all others did what they were told to do. Jesus, the son of God, had been crucified and resurrected, and his reappearance was imminent, or at any rate inevitable. Every human being adored him (the Jews and the Muslims being invisible). During the 1,436 years since the death of Saint Peter the apostle, 211 popes had succeeded him, all chosen by God and all infallible. The Church was indivisible, the afterlife a certainty; all knowledge was already known. *And nothing would ever change*. The mighty storm was swiftly approaching, but Europeans were not only unaware of it; they were convinced that such a phenomenon could not exist. Shackled in ignorance, disciplined by fear, and sheathed in superstition…

That, my friends, was the state of the Church and the abuses that I cannot begin to recount here, are legion because the religious institution with human leadership had power. That, of course, was a total betrayal of the biblical faith. It was already in Paul's day a question of how to live in accommodation with the secular power, the governing power. Romans 13 talks about that. And in the Gospel of Matthew we have already Matthew writing some 50 years after Jesus this little scene at Caesarea Philippi where Peter has the keys of the kingdom given to him, the preeminence of Peter. This was already the dealing of the authority question within that early Jesus movement. So, we're dealing with things here that are part and parcel of anything human.

But, Jesus, after he gives the keys of the kingdom to Peter and would seem to put such authority in his hands, follows that by saying "If anyone would follow me, he must take up his cross. If anyone would hold onto his life, he must lose it. If anybody would lose his life for my sake, he will find it." And when it finally came down, when the rubber hit the road, Jesus had a banquet quite in contrast to the one at Nicea in which he took bread and broke it and said, "This is my body," and he took wine and poured it out and said, "This is my blood," because Jesus was in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who spoke truth to power and refused to be co-opted by power.

Amos was just a farmer, he came to the royal palaces one day and began to preach and he said God is letting down a plumb line to measure the integrity of this kingdom, and that began to scare the counselors to the king, and so they called Amaziah, who was a hired lackey (a good king always hired a priest), and the priest came out and he said, "Hey, you farmer Amos, what are you doing here?" And Amos said, "The word of the Lord came to me," and the priest said, "We don't need the word of the Lord in the royal palace. Go back and preach to your sycamore trees and never come here again."

When you preach truth to power, you end up in the possibility of being crucified, but then you are only following the way of the one who even this morning says to us, in an open table, "This is my body; this is my blood," for the way of the Gospel is not the way of domination, control, and abuse, but is the way of grace, of

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compassion, offering the accessibility of God to all who are hungry and all who are thirsty. This is not the table of this congregation. This is not Peter's table nor mine, nor these elders. This is the table of our Lord who invited those who would stand in solidarity with him to take bread and cup and go forth strengthened, not to dominate, but to die that the world might live.

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