

Church History 101

Lesson 17

Church and State Struggles

Key Concepts: Following the legalization of the church by Constantine, the relationship between the church and the state had always been in flux. In the East the two worked smoothly together, while in the west the two contested for power for almost a thousand years.

The Story: In a very short period of time the Christian Church went from being outlawed to legal (313) to the official religion of the Roman Empire (380). During this period of transition the church began to be endowed with buildings, land and wealth. Along with these gifts it was also slowly accumulating power. It accumulated power because there was no separation between church and state. The Emperor was both head of the state and of the church, thus the power of the state was shared by the church.

This relationship, while surviving in the East slowly changed in the west. It changed because as the Roman Empire in the west collapsed, the church survived. And because it was the sole institution that survived the fall, it became in many ways the de-facto government, protecting the people and negotiating with invading armies. This led the church to see itself as a freestanding entity, unassociated with any particular political structure. The theological basis for this belief was provided by St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in his book The City of God. Augustine argued that only the church can steer the world toward its appropriate end which is the heavenly city of New Jerusalem, because all secular power is of the Devil. Thus the church needs to exercise its power to guide and direct all civil authority.

Thus the church in the west began to see itself as the primary locus of power extending even to the authority to approve or disapprove secular political leadership. One great example of this was Pope Leo III crowning Charlemagne as the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (December 25, 800 CE) even though there was still an Emperor in Constantinople. By 829 the Papacy declared that the king was subject to the church and that the power of the priest was greater than any secular authority.

This position was solidified by Pope Gregory VII (1073-85) in his dispute with Emperor Henry IV. Gregory excommunicated Henry three times in order to maintain Papal authority. In response Henry appointed a rival pope, Clement III. Even so Henry was finally unable to curb the growing power of the Papacy. The height of this power did not come until the reign of Innocent III (1198-1216) who arranged royal marriages, declared who would be Holy Roman Emperor, and forced one English king to pay tribute to the Papacy, as if the king's lands belonged to the Pope.

The power of the Papacy began to decline when Pope Boniface VIII was captured by and then died in the custody of Philip the Fair of France (1303). Philip and many other rulers were tired of the arrogance and power of the Papacy. Their resistance to Rome corresponded with a rise in nationalism, opposition to the crusades and the Inquisition. This led to the "Babylonian Captivity" (1305-1377) when the popes were prisoners of the French and French national interests. In 1377 Pope Gregory IX returned to Rome but on his death two years later Bishops elected two Popes (one in Rome and the other in France). When the church tried to settle the matter in 1409 they ended up with three Popes. Though the church would ultimately return to a single pontiff, its ability to control the political situation in the west would never be the same.

Questions:

1. How do you understand the relationship between church and state?
2. In your opinion should the church be involved in politics? Why or why not?
3. How does your faith inform your political views?