

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY 'GENESIS 3 CHRISTIANITY'

Having discussed (in a previous article) the nature and impact of 'Genesis 3 Christianity', that abbreviated gospel of '*sins forgiven-going to heaven when I die*', it is worth a serious look into the roots of its origins. This is an important inquiry into the two thousand years of ecclesiastical history. It is worth careful consideration. A good answer (and good answers only come with good questions) will provide guidance for our instruction in a better understanding of God's works and purposes with man. So we ask: How did the primitive church manage, in just a couple hundred years, to make the historical transition from Jesus' original gospel proclamation inaugurating the Kingdom of God to the thinking and practices that have eventuated in our present day partial gospel of '*sins-forgiven-going-to-heaven-when-I-die*'? At the beginning Jesus' announcement was a declaration of the imminent and immanent fulfillment of the patriarchal hopes and the prophetic promises for the long-expected Messianic Age. His message declared a divine kingdom with its righteous victory over Satan's rebellion, a victory early implied by God's promise of an Overcoming Seed. Of course Jesus' message would surely also include any necessary works for divine-human reconciliation. But such an atonement-based reconciliation would be accomplished because of the larger Kingdom-purposes in view. ***It seems that God always intended man's participation in the full defeat of all his enemies and then a co-regency with him in the resulting eternal and heavenly rule of righteousness.*** What happened that such good news was reduced to such a virtual caricature of heavenly business? If we are able to trace that unfortunate, even if unintended, transition, we will be better able to make the necessary corrections for a better and a fuller pathway for living the Christian faith as the Church of the Eschaton. With that hope of corrective instruction out of an examination of history, let's review the past two thousand year story of the church and see what we can learn from that rough and tumble and confusing journey. It is the historical saga of Christendom, the Renaissance, and Modernity!

CHRISTENDOM

It was a disaster with millennial-long consequences when one's baptismal certificate became essentially synonymous with papers of state citizenship. But such was the mistake when the early institutional churches lost the vision of the true nature and purpose of the Kingdom of God—and in good measure the heavenly life of the Holy Spirit as well! In 313 the Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan legalized Christianity. Jesus' followers understandably rejoiced at the cessation of the cruel and brutal persecutions and martyrdoms at the hands of the Roman Emperors. But little did the bishops and believers appreciate the spiritual dangers that would inevitably ensue for them as a result of such a *mutual joining of the worldly and institutional powers of church and state*. (Ponder for a moment: a Roman emperor, needing a unified Christian church to stabilize his reign and empire, actually moderated and pontificated as church bishops sought to resolve in a creed the theological issues concerning the incarnation at the church's first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 A.D.) Thus, already before the fourth century had ended, Christianity itself was the only legal religion of the Roman world and pagan sacrifices themselves were then outlawed. This development of a working harness between church and state was the result of the worldly church's loss of its true heavenly foundations. ***And the consequence was the establishing of the false perception for the coming centuries of Christendom that worldly ecclesiastical institutions are a major part of God's kingdom on earth.*** Such a model is also to be seen, perhaps even more egregiously, in the example of Caesaropapism within the hierarchy of the Eastern Church and the state authority in Byzantium. A proper godly distinction between church and state was lost. The Latin realms in the West also developed in kind, ending eventually (long after the total collapse of the Roman Empire—410/476 AD) with the papal coronation of Charlemagne in 800 AD as the new emperor of the emerging Holy Roman Empire. From these historical events arose the Christendom of

Western civilization and culture—the lands where one's baptismal certificate in infancy was also in effect the record of his citizenship in the state. Thus occurred for believers a total confusion with the loss of rightly recognizing what is truly meant for the Church Age—dwelling in the ontologically transcendent, here and now, truly present Kingdom of God.

For more than 1000 years this confusion of a union of the powers of church and state were conceptually and practically equated with the kingdom of God on earth. The joint powers of the states' physical armies and the church's sacramental enchantments assured a proper rule of the citizen-saints and their social structures throughout the medieval world and the feudal age. And that heritage remains with us even to this day—we know this culture and civilization as our own. It explains the common mixing of those feelings of patriotism and Christianity—and the equally common inability of many Christians to comprehend the source of social decline in a country of Judeo-Christian origins but individual freedoms. You can detect that legacy when considering the meaning of the family records pages so often included at the beginning of printed Bible editions. The records there of marriages, births, grandchildren, and deaths are relics of our heritage in the West. They testify to the powerful influence of the union between church and state as even today it lingers in memory and practice as remnants of Christendom still with us—but only on life supports. More of that later.

But first we want to consider in a little more detail how it actually appeared when the early church began to yield to that unionizing influence of what became Christendom. The Acts 2 church stumbled, lost its true calling, and yielded (surely unwittingly) to the assumed securities and advances of the Constantinian formula of a church-state structure for Christendom and the developing western civilization. The decline of the first century Church of Pentecost was both a cause and an effect in the development of the earthly and institutional church. And that worldly church was quick to cleverly identify itself with the kingdom of God in the world. For with that self-assumed authority it developed dogmas for the possession of peculiar powers of 'enchantment' to administer and thus to control the lives of those citizen-saints. The believers naïvely submitted to those earthly ecclesiastical powers in exchange for the promise of a secure entrance into heaven upon death. Significant among those 'enchancing' powers was the growth of a sacramental system which empowered the church to impart a heavenly rebirth (infant baptismal regeneration) and the forgiveness of sins (confession/penance and Eucharist). Thus, with such powers, an earthly and institutional church controlled the opening and the closing of heaven's gates for mankind. While disciples of the early church had been personally and experientially familiar with a powerful gift of the Holy Spirit and while it had looked for the manifest rule of Jesus in the Kingdom of God at his soon Parousia victory, such spiritually ontological realities of a proleptically present Kingdom of God began to quickly wane. ***A church of earthly institutions and powers replaced God's Kingdom and the powerful and manifest workings of the Holy Spirit were substituted with the clergy's enchanting and priestly sacramental powers.*** Our historical documentation of this transition is not entirely clear and easy to trace in all its details. But this fact is plain. The true Pentecostal life of the Holy Spirit and the reality that the Kingdom of God had already been truly inaugurated as a substantive reality just as Jesus said—that had all been significantly and tragically lost to the believers of the medieval realms of feudal-age Christendom. The crude history of the ruling institutions of state and church make the loss abundantly evident—from the moral lapses of the medieval church and state hierarchies to the perennial witness of believers outside those worldly institutions who have left us with a significant legacy in writing that testifies to the painful realities of an earthly church in spiritual decline. I have no desire to be too severe in evaluating or judging the infant church of the first century. The stress of persecution, its own challenges and shortcomings in understanding and interpreting the prophetic Scriptures, and their disappointment stemming from the failure of an expected soon return of Christ must give us a sympathetic pause in seeking to understand.

But also and above all, it should prompt us to be more diligent in perceiving God's will and ways for us nearly two thousand years later.

It seems clear that true spiritual life from the Holy Spirit and a correct understanding of the nature and processes of the eschatological Kingdom of God in the present Church Age were not, from the beginning, properly developed and transmitted down through the generations. In its place came an earthly church rather than the Kingdom of God; and its powers were the assumed 'enchancements' of a clerical sacerdotal system. All this, within a few centuries, became a part of the church/state coalition of powers within Christendom. Under these rulers the subject citizens of the medieval, feudal world were kept under the fear of sins' punishments (everlasting hellfire) and thus obedience to the institutions of an ecclesiastical dominion. After all, those authorities possessed the powers of spiritual life and forgiveness (through the sacraments) and thus controlled the chances of entering heaven at last. The sacral society thus created for the medieval world had the effect of putting Christians into an ecclesiastical bondage in order that they might be assured of forgiveness and their ultimate place in heaven. It is not difficult to see where the paradigm with a strong focus on a gospel of salvation, that is, a gospel of 'sins-forgiven-going-to-heaven-when-I-die', '*Genesis 3 Christianity*', had its fledgling roots. Its origins lie in the slip of first century Christianity into the medieval world of feudal Christendom with its earthly institutional church and its emphasized doctrine of sins and forgiveness of sins for an open heaven after life in this world. That salvation gospel was also practical for enforcing an earthly morality necessary for its maturing culture and civilization. But it really said little or nothing about God's eternal purposes throughout and beyond the present age! The early church emphasis on Jesus' mission for ransom and as *Christus Victor* (and the larger spiritual battles implied thereby) had been lost to a partial, a smaller message. The larger expectations for the complete defeat of all God's enemies and the Church's ultimate role in that victory and its subsequent righteous reign in a new heaven and a new earth, those larger expectations were lost.

RENAISSANCE

But the world of Christendom was destined to end. The civilization and culture of the medieval feudal age would be challenged by old ideas revived and new ideas introduced. The natures of both state rule by divine-right monarchies and ecclesiastical dominion through an absolute clericalism would be questioned, assaulted, and often rejected. The result was that the old social order of church/state civilizational partnership was, if not totally dissolved, at least radically altered. Unfortunately the changes of this new age would not eventuate in a good attempt by institutional churches to either recognize or to review the primitive church's loss of vision and calling. The state saw a renewed opportunity for dominance in a revised form while the church's foundational ideas of divine transcendence yielded slowly but surely to the anthropocentric humanism of the Enlightenment's Age of Reason. That is the condensed story of the Renaissance—the rise of secular humanism with its many innate dimensions of spiritual rebellion against both state and church. This advancing new epoch was harboring a radically different vision for the world order—church and state!

One might have expected that the Reformation age (as a sort of religious extension or reflection of the Renaissance) might correct the church's root error of a church-state union. Unfortunately, not so! While it is true that a genuine, if partial, renewal of the church and theology did take place in the 16th century, that fundamental medieval problem of the union of church and state as an earthly representation of the kingdom of God was neither perceived as a problem nor addressed. In fact the error continued and complicated the religious renewal with bloody warfare between the multiplying factions of the Reformation churches and the developing identities of new and independent nation states then being formed out of the waning Holy Roman Empire. We all know something of the story of

how the Reformation came about. The mercenary desires of that worldly church at last abused its powers so badly (think the sale of purgatorial indulgences seeking money from already impoverished serfs for the building of a new St. Peter's basilica in Rome) that a conscience-stricken professor-monk in Germany only and at last found peace with God in a more powerful and effective manner. His wrath against indulgence abuses burned so hot as to create an inferno in the medieval world order, an inferno already long kindled by ideas from Renaissance sparks with its own reform zeal. While that 16th century reform that emphasized forgiving grace gave a soothing comfort to many in that epoch of Renaissance changes, it failed to recognize the fundamental error of Christendom, the error of a church/state union forming a worldly church void of the Holy Spirit and not truly representing and serving the Kingdom of God. While the so-called 'stepchildren' of the Reformers (Luther naturally used much stronger terms for them) had witnessed throughout the medieval world to this failure, the root error endured among reform movements needing political/state protection. And the secular humanism of the Renaissance age found it convenient for the state also to maintain the church-state structures of the world of Christendom—only now the church was not one but many. But even this arrangement was about to be challenged. The Renaissance itself morphed into further and ever more advanced dimensions of secular humanism, outpacing the medieval worldview in many ways. By the time the religious wars of the 17th century were over, the Enlightenment and its offspring, the Age of Reason, were in full development mode and the Christendom model took an even more unedifying turn. The new and more mature paradigm for the modern world would see, not a church-state co-regency but a definite independence and pompous dominance of secular state authorities. Now the church itself would have to adjust to something like servitude to the newer claims from secular humanism. An example of the church's weak attempts to once more engage and operate in the political world, only now on the world's terms, can be seen in the 1891 papal encyclical appropriately named *Rerum Novarum (Of New Things)*. And the Lateran Treaty in 1929 likely betrays a latent desire within man's church to be an equal party to worldly matters—it was hard to let go of medieval powers and glory that were earthly even though established on a human claim to a heavenly authority and role.

Briefly then, this has been my beginning of a summary for the historical origins of '*Genesis 3 Christianity*' through the time of the Renaissance. First, in the early centuries the church had lost its original vision and calling to be the now-present manifestation of the promised Kingdom of God. For whatever the reasons and causes, it yielded to the tempting promises of the Constantinian formula of church-state union. And so in Christendom a new paradigm arose—an earthly and institutional church with sacerdotal powers of enchantment. We see there the rise of the first articles of '*Genesis 3 Christianity*': Church and state worked together for the establishment of a certain social order and structure. The medieval feudal world was governed by the monarchies of state; the power to grant the forgiveness of sins and open heaven's gates after death was ruled by the church's sacraments. But that world ended with the coming of the Renaissance. That age of renewals saw the revival of classical thinking and, with that, the strong resurgence of the raw secular thinking that the coming of Christianity had at first successfully challenged. In the thinking of the Renaissance movements of Enlightenment and Reason, the state changed from monarchies to democracy while the church was reduced to a lesser, a more supportive and optional secondary role. The radical maturing of both of these changes brought us to the Modern Age. The separation of church and state did nothing helpful to correct the problems that had arisen as a result of that original root error. Indeed, the problem was exacerbated by the sinister appearance of subtle and growing powers that had a tendency to militate aggressively against Christianity's innate and essential transcendent thinking. That ugly 'blossom' would flourish in the new movements that matured in Modernity. So we come to consider the ways in which believers in our Modern Age have dealt with and still deal with the heritage thus received. For them humanism matured into a secular existentialism that would even reject notions of absolute truth!

MODERNITY

It was the Modern World that emerged from the Renaissance's dismantling of Christendom's thinking and life. Both state and church institutions underwent progressively more radical changes. Monarchies gradually lost that principle of an absolute divine right for kings. Under the influence of the Age of Reason, secular humanism glorified personal individualism and autonomy. Thus arose ideas of democracy and government by 'the consent of the ruled'. By the time Modernity reached its postmodern age in the twentieth century, any remaining kings and queens were a curious relic of history. The true state authorities were learning to wield their 'faux democratic' powers under false pretenses—an electorate of ignorant, selfish, and manipulated voters! That story expanded would very likely be the introductory segment for the apocalyptic events in an advanced stage of the eschaton. It will always be a topic of interest and speculation for many Christians. But for our purposes in this article it is the 'church' within Modernity, rather than the state, that is of special interest!

As already said, the Renaissance had separated the mutually supporting powers and functions of state and church. The net result for the church was a loss of self-respect, of power and purpose in society, and of a genuine self-identity. Centuries earlier it had lost its sense of calling to be the true Kingdom of God on earth in an eschatological Church Age. It had wasted many centuries seeking to partner with the world's powers in a faux display of social and cultural development. As this mammoth and worldly institutional relic was filtered out of the Christendom-Renaissance events, it wrestled to reinvent itself. Two opposing concepts came into existence. These two concepts did not exist as two denominations or church bodies but rather as two new and opposing interpretations for the nature and purpose of the church in the world. These two concepts or interpretations for *church* developed side by side throughout western civilization. Eventually they would actually be in open conflict with one another and each would take refuge in varying degrees within church groups and organizations that were mutually compatible and sympathetic. (Curiously, one can see different vestiges of medieval Christendom nestled in each.) The *church* in Modernity found itself divided between and harboring two contrasting views of its nature and calling. Neither is fully worthy of Jesus' vision. We will briefly look at the first and then, more carefully, at the second. It is the second which is of keen interest to us—for it is the heir and practitioner of the medieval '*Genesis 3 Christianity*' paradigm, that 'sins-forgiven-going-to-heaven-when-I-die' model of the faith.

The first interpretation of *church* within modern Christianity is the branch that eagerly and fully embraces Enlightenment's secular humanism along with its Age of Reason rejection of the transcendent. In another place I have written an article entitled *The 'Quest'*. That article focused on the liberal theology that developed in the eighteenth century's rationalistic thinking. Its roots lie deep in the scholastic thinking of one Abelard. It shared the utopian optimism of the times, believing with most all Renaissance thinkers that man was 'the measure of all things'. It believed in the essential goodness of humanity. So it translated this positive outlook of humanism into a general moral teaching for ethical behavior. Because it rejected the elements of transcendence and supernaturalism, it came easily in league with the growing philosophical outlooks of the world of naturalism, psychology, and other related views of the Enlightenment. Jesus, in whatever minimalist way he might be divine, was a great moral philosopher—easily seen to be compatible with other religions and religious teachers (think the rapid rise of syncretistic philosophies together with the rejection of Christianity's claims to unique and absolute truth). It is unnecessary to describe further. This first division of Christianity in Modernity became the cheerleader and activist for the social gospel movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As such it once again found a comfortable place working with the governments of socialist states (here think political activism expressing a worldly concept of the kingdom of God) that were

emerging during those centuries on the world stage. Behold branch one of the church in Modernity! Lost is its medieval co-regency with the state in the affairs of the world. Now humbled, it serves as an NGO to the world's governments. Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si* is an example. The ancient deception (human pride at Babel), the error to which even the early church itself had succumbed, the deception that failed then and now refuses to comprehend an ontological and proleptic presence of the Kingdom of God as it was inaugurated by the incarnation of Jesus—that deception was and still is the tragic mistake of the first division of modern Christianity as it developed out of the ruins of Christendom and was precipitated by secular Renaissance thinking. But sadly, even dangerously, this first group of Christians in Modernity has set itself up to be co-working participants of the eschatological whore of John's Revelation. In the name of and desiring to perfect humanity in a great realm of human glory and power (that which Jesus rejected in a great battle of temptation during his own earthly pilgrimage), it has and is often aligning itself with less-than-honorable political powers of global domination.

But it is the failure of the second division of Christianity in Modernity that has most taken as its own *sedes doctrinae* the problem plant of '*Genesis 3 Christianity*'. I am inclined to believe that most of such believers are sincere and well-intentioned. They have rejected much of the ecclesiastical siren song of modern humanism, higher criticism, existentialism, and all the mumbo jumbo of Enlightenment Deism. They are sincere church members; they make good neighbors and good citizens. But they have failed to see the ecclesiastical failures and errors of history as we have described it. And they have then failed to apply those insights to the teachings and practices of the typical conservative evangelical church today. While the first type of Christian seeks after the prestige and authority of working with the world, the second type of Christian in Modernity seeks the peace and security offered by the sacerdotal system of 'sins-forgiven-going-to-heaven-when-I-die'. Such Christians regularly reject that sacerdotal system, but they consistently hold to a heavenly kingdom later as the metanarrative and goal of Christianity. Therefore, in each case or group of the contemporary church of Modernity, the root error is the same—the loss by the early church of the meaning and calling of being the people of an ontological and proleptic Kingdom of God during a unique eschatological Church Age designed by God for participation in the complete and final defeat of and spiritual victory over iniquity in preparation for the everlasting reign of righteousness! Ecclesiastical history is the story of that one shortcoming of perspective, understanding, and experience being a continual adversary to believers. The beauty and blessings intended by God for the present church age are in need of recovery and obedience!

This, in brief, is my suggestion for an interpretive paradigm for the historical origins and roots of contemporary '*Genesis 3 Christianity*'. It leads us to ask a question concerning the contemporary results of '*Genesis 3 Christianity*'. We have seen how the early church itself failed to capture and execute its calling. What has been the impact on the life and walk of such believers? We have observed how an earthly and institutional church abused its powers by working off of the 'sins-forgiveness-heaven' paradigm. And we have seen that the Reformation itself failed to hear and to heed the warnings and experience of believers outside the institutional church. And we have observed the issues of two different divisions of the church in Modernity. It is time to make an honest evaluation of the results of two millennia of failure to grasp and live with the Church's true calling. We can only imagine the glory and honor to God that might follow!