

against  
christianity

Peter Leithart

CANON PRESS  
MOSCOW, IDAHO

Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity*  
© 2003 by Peter Leithart

Published by Canon Press, P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843  
800-488-2034 / [www.canonpress.org](http://www.canonpress.org)  
Printed in the United States of America.  
Cover design by Paige Atwood.

03 04 05 06 07 08      9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Leithart, Peter J.  
*Against Christianity* / Peter Leithart.  
p. cm.  
ISBN 1-59128-006-0 (pbk.)  
1. Christianity—Essence, genius, nature. I. Title.  
BT60 .L45 2002  
230—dc21

2002015015

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# Preface

I have written an unbalanced book. I have written an unfair book. I have written a fragmented book. I have written an incomplete book. (I think my liver is diseased.)

Had I but world enough and time, *Against Christianity* would have been an exhaustive, comprehensive, thoroughly researched, carefully nuanced and infinitely qualified, multi-volume work. Alas, I have neither.

Or, maybe not “Alas.” This book is theological bricolage and lurches at many points toward a form of theological haiku. I have come to think, however, that this is all for the good, for the effect I hope for is the effect of haiku. At its best, haiku glances at the familiar from an awkward angle; it presents what we normally approach straight-on from the side or underneath or inside out and helps us to see it, in a flash, as something wholly new.

I hope that my book has a similar effect. I cannot hope to “convince” readers or “prove” anything here, since I have certainly not provided enough argument or evidence to compel agreement. I hope instead to hint at, gesture toward, trace, or sketch what may be a fresh approach to the (mainly ecclesiological) issues I discuss, more to change readers’ angle of vision than persuade.

The *basso continuo* that supports these melodic fragments—that the Church is a culture, a new city, a polity unto herself—is

a constant theme in recent theology. New Testament scholars (N. T. Wright, Richard Horsley, James D. G. Dunn, Krister Stendahl), systematicians (John Milbank, George Lindbeck, Oliver O'Donovan), ethicists (John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas), sociologists of religion (Rodney Stark), historians of early Christianity (Wayne Meeks), and more popular writers (Rodney Clapp, Wes Howard-Brook, Barry Harvey) have all said more or less what I am saying.

Why say it again then?

Well, for starters, I have long wanted to write a book with the word *against* in the title.

More seriously, I hope that *Against Christianity* offers some modest contributions to the discussion. I have attempted to clarify several points and to argue for some under-represented positions. Chapter 1 gives several sizable pieces of exegetical defense for the notion that the Church is a *polis*, since exegetical treatments of the subject are sometimes rather weak. Chapter 3 is about baptism and the Supper, issues mentioned in passing but not, in my reading, given their full due. Finally, after four contrarian chapters, I find something to be *for* in chapter 5, but a cheer for Constantine (not to mention two or three) runs against the grain of recent theology. So, chapter 5 is actually as contrarian as the rest, if not even more so.

Whether these parts of the book advance the discussion or not remains to be seen. A basic premise of the book is that it is far past time that Christians learned to live in refreshed categories, given that the available categories confine, when they do not actually deform, the gospel we are called to preach and live.

\* \* \*

*Against Christianity* began its life as an article in *Christendom Essays*, the 100th edition of the Biblical Horizons newsletter. Thanks to Jim Jordan, the director of Biblical Horizons, for publishing

that original article. Jim also read through the entire manuscript and made many suggestions. Jeff Meyers was also kind enough to read through the manuscript and offer his advice. Much of the thinking and reading behind this book was done during my doctoral studies at Cambridge, under the direction of John Milbank, whose writings and conversations were wonderfully stimulating. Thanks, finally, to Doug Jones for his willingness to publish these bits and pieces, and for being kind (or diplomatic) enough to say he liked them.

*Peniel Hall*

*June 2002*

1

# Against Christianity

1

The Bible never mentions Christianity. It does not preach Christianity, nor does it encourage us to preach Christianity. Paul did not preach Christianity, nor did any of the other apostles. During centuries when the Church was strong and vibrant, she did not preach Christianity either. Christianity, like Judaism and “Yahwism,” is an invention of biblical scholars, theologians, and politicians, and one of its chief effects is to keep Christians and the Church in their proper marginal place. The Bible speaks of Christians and of the Church, but Christianity is gnostic, and the Church firmly rejected gnosticism from her earliest days.

2

Christianity is the heresy of heresies, the underlying cause of the weakness, lethargy, sickness, and failure of the modern church.

3

In a sense, I have stated a simple fact: the word “Christianity” does not appear in the Bible, so it is quite impossible for the Bible to encourage us to believe or preach or practice Christianity. In itself, this linguistic fact has little significance. I worship and pray to the triune God, though the word *Trinity* never appears in Scripture. Even the absence of the word *Christianity* is not entirely irrelevant, because it demonstrates that God is perfectly capable of revealing



Himself and His plan without using that word.

More important, however, is the fact that the Bible does not even have the concept of Christianity. This, of course, begs the question of what I mean by “Christianity.” On the one hand, Christianity sometimes refers to a set of doctrines or a system of ideas. It is contrasted with the teachings of Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam. By this definition, Christianity is what Christian people believe about God, man, sin, Christ, the world, the future, and so on. The Bible, however, never speaks of such beliefs except as all-embracing, self-committing confessions of God’s people. The Bible gives no hint that a Christian “belief system” might be isolated from the life of the Church, subjected to a scientific or logical analysis, and have its truth compared with competing “belief systems.”

The Church is not a people united by common ideas, ideas which collectively go under the name “Christianity.” When the Bible speaks of a people united by faith it does not simply mean that we have the same beliefs about reality. Though the New Testament does use “faith” to refer to a set of teachings (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:7), “faith” stretches out to include one’s entire “stance” in life, a stance that encompasses beliefs about the world but also unarticulated or inarticulable attitudes, hopes, and habits of thought, action, or feeling. To be of “one mind” (Phil. 1:27) means to share projects, aspirations, and ventures, not merely to hold to the same collection of doctrines. Besides, the Church is united not only by one *faith* but also by one *baptism* (Eph. 4:4–6), manifests her unity in common participation in one *loaf* (1 Cor. 10:17), and lives together in mutual deference, submission, and love.

The Bible, in short, is not an ideological tract and does not teach an ideology. Scripture does present a certain view of the world that has true propositional content. But it is an error, and a fatal one, to suggest that, once we have systematized the propositional content of Scripture, the result is a “worldview”

called Christianity to which we can give our assent, and there an end. French usage notwithstanding (*christianisme*), it is a radical distortion to think of Scripture's teaching as an "ism."

On the other hand, "Christianity" is sometimes defined more broadly to embrace not only beliefs of Christian people but also the practices of the Church, her liturgies and ways of living in community. This is more healthy than defining Christianity as a system of ideas, yet even here the concept of Christianity conflicts with what the Bible reveals, insofar as the beliefs and practices of Christianity are seen as "religious" beliefs and practices over against "secular" or "political" or "social" practices, insofar as Christianity is conceived of as a "religious" layer added onto human life.

Scripture does not urge us to embrace "religion" in this sense. The Christian is not a natural man who has become religious. Already before conversion, Paul said, many early Christians were highly religious, devoting themselves earnestly to the worship of idols. Conversion, moreover, did not just involve a change of liturgical habit. According to the New Testament, the Christian participates in a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) and is a Spiritual person in contrast to the natural person (1 Cor. 2:6–16)—a human who is, as many recent theologians have put it, human in a different way. To be a Christian means to be refashioned in all of one's desires, aims, attitudes, actions, from the shallowest to the deepest.

This is not a matter of giving shape to unshaped human nature. There is no formless, underlying "human stuff" waiting to be molded into a Christian shape. We have no "desires" or "aims" or "thoughts" or "attitudes" *in general*. We always desire certain things rather than others, aim in one direction and not another, think about this or think about that—the stuff is always already formed. For the unbeliever, the problem is not that the stuff is unformed but that it is badly and wrongly formed and has to be reformed and transformed into the form of Christ. If one is a

Christian at all, he or she is (however imperfectly) a Christian from head to toe, inside and out. As the late liturgical scholar Mark Searle put it, everyone has a way of “leaning into life,” and the Christian strives to “lean into life,” all of life, Christianly. Conversion does not simply install a new “religious” program over the existing operating system. It installs a new operating system.

Christian community, by the same token, is not an extra “religious” layer on social life. The Church is not a club for religious people. The Church is a way of living together before God, a new way of being human *together*. What Jesus and the apostles proclaimed was not a new ideology or a new religion, in our attenuated modern sense. What they proclaimed was salvation, and that meant a new human world, a new social and political reality. They proclaimed that God had established the eschatological order of human life in the midst of history, not perfectly but truly. The Church anticipates the form of the human race as it will be when it comes to maturity; she is the “already” of the new humanity that will be perfected in the “not yet” of the last day. Conversion thus means turning from one way of life, one culture, to another. Conversion is the beginning of a “resocialization,” induction into an alternative *paideia*, and “inculturation” into the way of life practiced by the eschatological humanity.

In the New Testament, we do not find an essentially private gospel being applied to the public sphere, as if the public implications of the gospel were a second story built on the private ground floor. The gospel *is* the announcement of the Father’s formation, through His Son and the Spirit, of a new city—the city of God.

#### 4

Throughout this book, I use the word *city* to refer both to actual cities, ancient and modern, and to “civilizations” (from *civitas*), ancient and modern.

*Modernity* refers to the civilization of the West since about 1500. Culturally, modernity is characterized by “value pluralism,” which entails the privatization of religious institutions and religious claims. Every individual and every group chooses its own values, and civil society is the arena where those values enter into combat. Politically, modernity is shaped by “liberalism,” the political system dedicated to the one proposition that political systems must not be dedicated to one proposition.<sup>1</sup>

Though it has roots in the patristic period, Christianity in its more developed form is the Church’s adjustment of the gospel to modernity, and the Church’s consequent acceptance of the world’s definition of who we are and what we should be up to. Christianity is biblical religion disemboweled and emasculated by (voluntary) intellectualization and/or privatization.

Christianity is not merely a haphazard embrace of the values and practices of the modern world. Worldliness in that sense has plagued the Church since Corinth and will be a temptation to the end of time. Christianity is institutionalized worldliness, worldliness accepted in principle, worldliness not at the margins but at the center, worldliness built into the foundation.

Christianity is worldliness that has become so much our second nature that we call it piety.

## 5

We have made the Church strange and alien to the world, as if she were of a completely different order than the institutions of common social and political life. Paradoxically, the result of this estrangement has been to reshape the Church into the image of the world.

The Church *is* strange: she is the creation of the Father through Word and Spirit, the community of those who have been united by the Spirit with the Son, and therefore brought into the eternal community of the Trinity. She is a city whose town square is in heaven. She is a city without walls or boundary

lines, a polity without sword or shield. Of no other society can *that* be said.

But she is ordinary: the Church is made up of human beings, with features that identify her as a culture among the cultures of the world. God did not enter a world of books with blurks; He did not intervene in a world of rituals and meals with spatuals and gleals; He did not call His people to live according to specific quormal principles or to promote a particular uphos.

Rather, God created a world of stories, symbols, rituals, and community rules. Into this world of stories, God introduced a rival story; into a world of books, God came with His own library; in a world of symbols and rituals and sacrificial meals, the Church was organized by a ritual bath and a feast of bread and wine; in the midst of cultures with their own ethos and moral atmosphere, God gathered a community to produce the aroma of Christ in their life together.

Only by insisting on the Church's ordinariness can we simultaneously grasp her strangeness.

## 6

The Church can cut across the grain of existing human social and cultural life only if she bears some likeness to existing societies. If she is a completely different sort of thing, then societies and nations and empires can go on their merry way ignoring the Church, or, equally deadly, find some murky alleyway to push her into.

But if the Church is God's society among human societies, a heavenly city invading the earthly city, then a territorial conflict is inevitable.

## 7

YEAR: Sometime in the mid-first century A.D.

SCENE: Conference room, Barnus Marketing Consultants, Jerusalem office.

CHARACTERS: Georgus Barnus, religious marketing consultant; two weather-beaten fishermen named Peter and John; and a spry, sharp-eyed former Pharisee named Paul.

*Barnus (consulting a parchment):* I understand, gentlemen, that you want to start what we in the business call a “New Religious Movement”—or “nirm” for short. Is that right?

*John:* I suppose so.

*Barnus:* I should tell you the market is flooded. There are more religions on offer today than you can imagine. And just because you come from the East doesn’t give you any edge. Lots of nirms are coming from Persia and further east, and they’re spilling over into Asia and as far as Rome. Maybe you should consider some other line of business. Are you sure you can make it in this market?

*Peter:* But we have the truth. Those other religions serve false gods, and the living God has commissioned us to take good news to all men.

*Barnus:* Sure. Well, I’m a consultant, and I wanted to make sure that you knew what you were getting into. Full disclosure and all that; we don’t want to end up with some messy lawsuit, do we? Anyway, the first thing we do in this kind of situation is scope out the market, see who the competition is, and find our niche.

*Peter:* Ah, Mr. Barnus. I need to explain something. You’ve mentioned the market a few times. But we meet in houses, not in the market.

*Barnus (chuckling):* No, no. I see the mistake. You’ve misunderstood me. This is quite funny. I’m using *market* in a metaphorical sense. Imagine there’s a market place where people are selling religious things. . . .

*John:* Like amulets and calves’ livers?

*Barnus:* No, no. Eternal life, satisfaction, contentment, that sort of thing.

*John*: I see.

*Barnus*: Very good. Now, I'm suggesting that we think of the various religious options around the Roman world as a "market" in this metaphorical sense. All kinds of religious goods are being offered, there are different methods of "payment," and so on. We need to know where you fit in. What are you offering? Who is offering the same kind of goods? Who's the competition? How do people pay? Is your "price" competitive?

*Paul*: OK. What can you tell us about this "market"? (*making quotation marks with his fingers*).

*Barnus*: You said you meet in houses? Maybe the thing to do is position yourself as an alternative to traditional household religions. That would be a tough market to get into, though. Households religion thrive on being dusty and ancient; not many new "household" religions get off the ground. As you know, domestic, ancestral religions are among the oldest and most venerated religions in the Roman world and in Asia. Roman households are all equipped with hearth fires that not only serve as furnaces but as domestic altars. A portion of every meal is tossed into the fire as an offering to the ancestors who are, in some way, identified with the flame. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know.

*John*: Yes, that might work. After all, Jesus taught us to call one another brothers, and we do think of ourselves as the "household of God."

*Peter*: That's right. Our worship, Mr. Barnus, includes a meal; we have older men who lead the church and teach us; and we do have women and children in our assemblies. We do want to cultivate the atmosphere of a family.

*John*: And Jesus said that we had to leave father and mother to cling to Him. He taught us that we are a new family "competing" (*fingering quotation marks*) with old families.

*Paul:* This is all true. But you are both forgetting something very important.

*Peter:* What's that?

*Paul:* We are a household and a family, but we're not connected by blood. You see, Mr. Barnus, we have Jews *and* Gentiles in our gatherings, and people from every land and tribe and tongue. That's part of the good news God wants us to preach. While we may be a household, we're a very unusual sort of household.

*Peter (blushing):* Of course. How could I have forgotten that?

*Barnus:* Let's list "household religion" as a "subordinate competitor," then. But we still need to figure out your main competition. Would you say that you're a "client cult"?

*John:* Could you explain that a bit?

*Barnus:* Certainly. A client cult is a specialty religion, you might say. Each god has a particular capability—say, healing disease—and his priests are able to communicate that benefit to cult members.

*Paul:* Yes, I know how this works. A person approaches the priest of one cult on Monday for help in his business, and goes to another priest of a completely different god on Wednesday to ensure a safe pregnancy for his wife.

*Peter:* Well, that's nothing like what we're talking about. It sounds as if client cults don't demand the kind of devotion we expect. That really is like a marketplace.

*Barnus:* That's right. Client cults have adherents, but nobody "converts" to a client cult.

*John:* And the gods of those cults are nothing like the God we serve. We're apostles of the Creator of all things, not a "specialty god." He's one God, the only God, and He demands that we worship and serve Him alone.

*Barnus:* Do you mean that you expect your members to abandon all the other cults?

*John:* That's right.



*Barnus:* Well, you might want to reconsider that. That's a pretty steep price to pay. You may not be competitive.

*John:* We'll take our chances.

*Peter:* I just had another thought. Client cults don't really form a community, do they? If clients come and go as they please, it's every man for himself.

*Barnus:* Good point. I can see you're talking about a completely different set-up. Client cults are not really the main competition. What about mystery religions? You know, those cults with secret initiation rituals and all that stuff about dying and rising with the gods. They have a more communal feel to them, and they talk a lot about "salvation" for their worshipers.

*Paul:* I've never had much time for mystery religions.

*John:* Neither have I. But we do have a rite of initiation that's all about dying and rising with Jesus. At least that's similar. And I've heard that some of those mystery religions actually wash their initiates, just like in baptism.

*Peter:* I've heard that too. But, if I understand it right, those baths are not the initiation; they are just preparation for a very complicated initiation. It's not much like baptism at all, really. We just sprinkle a bit of water, and it's over. That *is* the initiation. Remember Pentecost? If we had to put all those converts through a mystery initiation, we'd still be doing it.

*Paul:* That's true, Peter. Besides, mystery religions are like client cults. Somebody initiated into one of them might be worshipping other gods too. For us, baptism divides between us and the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup>

*Barnus:* This is fascinating. I brought up those religions first because I figured those would be the closest competitors. But this raises an interesting problem. Those are all private religions. Maybe what you're proposing isn't a private religion at all. Maybe you're talking about a new public religion.

*Peter:* Like the Jews.

*Barnus:* Exactly. Jews aren't a client cult or mystery religion. Technically, legally, they form a *politeuma* in many cities, a more or less self-governing community, a "virtual city within the city."<sup>3</sup>

*Paul:* That's exactly what we're after. We see ourselves as a new city within the city. We're a transformed Israel, a people called to be Jews in a new way. Our groups are like colonies of a heavenly empire right in the middle of earthly cities.

*Barnus:* Well, Judaism is definitely one of the leading competitors.

*John:* And don't forget the civic religions. That's what I first thought of when you mentioned "public religion."

*Barnus:* Hmm. Let me make sure I understand you. As you know, the cities throughout the empire have always been religious as much as civic organizations, and the same is true of the city of Rome, its colonies, the associated *municipiae*, and the military installations throughout the empire. For Greeks and Romans, being a citizen is bound up with participating in feasts and holidays, which include worship of the city's gods. To be Greek or Roman isn't just an ethnic or political fact; it's religious.

*Paul:* That's still true today, and not just in Rome. Most of the cities in Asia still worship their traditional gods, even if they worship some Roman gods too. I remember being in Ephesus and getting into trouble with the worshipers of Artemis. There was a riot, and I nearly got pulled into pieces. They realized that my preaching about Jesus threatened their whole city.

*Barnus:* So, you're saying that you intend to enter the market of civic religions?

*John:* Sure, and don't forget emperor worship. Since Augustus, it has been spread everywhere, and it's bestial. We intend to attack that too.

*Barnus:* Excuse me? Did you mention the imperial cult?

*John:* That's right.

*Barnus:* Do you mean that you're intending to compete with the imperial cult?

*Paul:* Yes. We're sent to proclaim that there's another king, one Jesus. We preach that there's another empire, the kingdom of God, which brings true peace on earth, not just the truce that Rome forces on people. Resistance to Rome and all its false and idolatrous claims is pretty central to what we're doing.

*Barnus:* You're talking about another king? Do you understand what this means? The imperial cult is backed up by the power of Rome. I mean, it's not like you could take on Rome and win.

*Peter, John, and Paul:* Why not?

*Barnus:* Gentlemen, I'm very sorry. I can't help you. You have completely misunderstood what we're doing here. I don't think you're starting another religion; you're doing something else entirely. I am a religious consultant, not a political revolutionary. I'm afraid that we won't be able to work together.

*[Barnus gathers up his parchments and leaves in some haste, forgetting to close the door behind him. The three apostles shrug, and head off to the temple to preach about Jesus.]*

## 8

As Bonhoeffer emphasized, given the fact that the Church arose from within Judaism, the Church should seek to be re-formed into a more Hebraic image. This insight, endorsed by many recent theologians, is often linked to a belief that contemporary Jews are still in covenant with God (this view is called "anti-supersessionism"). Though I cannot here enter into a full critique of anti-supersessionism, one point needs to be made: exegetically, it is abundantly clear from the New Testament that the covenant is made with Jesus and with all who are in Him and only with those who are in Him. Anti-supersessionism seems more a result of post-Holocaust guilt than of exegesis.<sup>4</sup>

## 9

For the New Testament writers, the city of Christians is a heavenly one that will be revealed in the last days (Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:18–27; Rev. 21). Churches on earth are outposts of that heavenly Jerusalem, anticipations of the final city, joined in a mysterious way, especially in liturgy, with the heavenly city. Every Lord’s Day, we, like John, enter into heavenly places, even while we remain in the middle of the earthly assembly. Heaven is in our midst, and we are in the midst of heaven. Responding with homage and worship to the authority of the risen and ascended Lord, the Church is formed as a polity.<sup>5</sup>

Every church is an urban reality; every Christian lives in the suburbs.

## 10

Though weakened in modern Christian usage, the Greek *koinonia* began its life as a political term. Aristotle’s *Politics* begins with the claim that “every state is an association (*koinonia*),” a term that in some translations is rendered as “community.” Aristotle recognized that there are various kinds of associations, various ways in which men share projects, goods, and talents with each other. The city (*polis*) is the highest kind of *koinonia*, a political *koinonia*:

Since we see that every city is some sort of community and that every community gets established with some good in view (for everyone does everything for the sake of what they think good), it is clear that while all communities have some good that they are aiming at, the community that has the control of all and embraces all the others is doing this most of all and is aiming at the most controlling of goods. This community is the city as it is called, the community that is political. (*Politics* 1252a1–6)

Like other communities, the political *koinonia* is establishing things that are “common” (*koinos*) to the citizens:

A city is not a matter of sharing a place in common or for the purpose of not doing each other wrong and for commerce. Rather, while these things must be present yet there is a city only when households and families form a community in living well for the sake of a complete and self-sufficient existence. . . .<sup>6</sup> The end then of the city is living well, but these other things are for the sake of the end, and a city is the community of families and villages in a complete and self-sufficient life, which, we say, is living happily and nobly. (*Politics* 1280b29ff.)

According to the apostles, the Church also forms a *koinonia* because things are held in common. Ultimately, the *koinonia* of the Church arises from a common sharing in Christ and His Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12–13). Christ’s body and His Spirit are “public goods,” the “common property” of every member. This basic level of *koinonia* in the Son and Spirit takes various visible forms in the life of the Church. Having a “share” in the Spirit, each member is obligated to “share” whatever gifts he receives for the good of the body (12:7). What the Spirit gives is, as Augustine would say, only rightly possessed insofar as it is given away. Every gift is a seed, which produces a harvest only if sown.

Table fellowship, likewise, manifests the Church’s *koinonia* in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16–17), and in Acts the members of the Jerusalem church consider their own property as wealth to be used for the common good (Acts 2:42, 44; *koinonia*, *koinos*). For the first Christians in Jerusalem, community life was shaped by common adherence to the teaching of the apostles, participation in common prayers, table fellowship, as well as sharing of alms (Acts 2:42).<sup>7</sup> In several places, Paul urged a mutual sharing of goods, insisting that those who “sow spiritual things” by teaching and preaching should “reap material things” from those who benefit, so that there will be “equality” or “mutuality” among all (1 Cor. 9:11; 2 Cor. 8:13–14). Within the Church Paul attempted to establish an economy of gift-exchange, a chiasm of gift, reception, and return gift that replicated the eternal communion of love in the Trinity.

In short: Paul did not attempt to find a place for the Church in the nooks and crannies of the Greco-Roman *polis*. The Church was not an addition, but an alternative to, the *koinonia* of the *polis*.

## 11

Founded by Philip of Macedon, Philippi became world-famous as the site of the battle in which Antony and Octavian triumphed over Brutus and Cassius. When Octavian later defeated Antony at Actium in 31 B.C., he rebuilt Philippi, established a military base, moved in Roman soldiers, and made it a colony. Philippi was brought under the *jus Italicum*, “the legal quality of Roman territory in Italy—the highest privilege obtainable by a provincial municipality.” Since their city had this status, Philippians could purchase property and were exempt from certain taxes.<sup>8</sup>

When he was in the city, Paul got a glimpse of the Philippians’ pride in their standing as a Roman colony. Paul and Silas exorcized a girl who was being used as a fortune-teller, and as a result her owners became enraged and brought Paul before the magistrates. Their charges are revealing: Paul and Silas, they said, were “throwing our city into confusion” by encouraging “customs (*ethe*) which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans” (Acts 16:20–21). Paul and Silas’s teaching was seen as a threat to Philippi’s Roman identity and way of life. As in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9), the apostles were seen as subversives, both of the *polis* and the empire.

Philippi’s civic pride is important background to Paul’s letter to the Philippians. As pointed out by Stanley Stowers, the letter shows marks of being a “letter of friendship.”<sup>9</sup> In expressing his friendship with the church, Paul used words related to *koinonia*: the Philippians were partners with him in the gospel (1:5), co-sufferers with his trials (1:7), and shared his rejoicing and suffering (2:17–18; 4:14). Indeed, Paul had entered into a *koinonia* with the Philippians by giving and receiving of gifts (4:15), a

practice commonly associated with friendship in the ancient world. Similarly, when Paul urged the Philippians to be “of one mind (*mia psyche*)” (1:27; 2:2), he employed language that had been used for centuries as a definition of friendship (Aristotle, *Ethics* 1163b6–7).

According to the tradition Paul invoked in Philippians, friendship was not confined to some private sphere. In the Greco-Roman world friendship was often a quasi-public institution, as much about sharing business or religious enterprises as it was about sharing feelings in private. In keeping with this, both Plato and Zeno the Stoic “understood their communities of friends as alternatives to the social order of the Greek city,” and the church historian Eusebius wrote of the Epicureans, “The school of Epicurus resembles a true commonwealth (*politeia*), altogether free of factionalism, sharing one mind and one disposition, of which there were and are and, it appears, will be willing followers.” Paul described the Philippian church as a *koinonia* of friends, but that did not mean that he reduced the Church to a private institution. To say that the Church is a community of friends is to say that it is an alternative city.<sup>10</sup>

The political dimensions of friendship come to explicit expression in Philippians 1:27–30, where Paul employed a cluster of friendship terms and phrases: “come and see you/remain absent,” “one spirit,” “one mind,” “striving together.” Verses 27–30 are a single sentence in Greek, and the main verb is *politeuo*, which means “to live as a citizen.” All these “friendship” terms expound on what it means to “live as a citizen in a manner worthy of the gospel.” Philippians 1:27–30 anticipates the language of Philippians 3:20, where Paul declared that the Philippian Christians were citizens of a “heavenly commonwealth (*politeuma*).” The Philippians, so proud of being Roman citizens and so protective of Roman custom, needed to learn to live as citizens of a different commonwealth that placed new demands on its citizens.

These political dimensions are further explored in Philippians 3.<sup>11</sup> As N. T. Wright has pointed out, one of the puzzles of the chapter is the purpose of Paul's description of his own background as a Jew. One aspect of this is clear: Paul presented himself as a concrete example of the attitude he commended in Philippians 2:5–11. Like Jesus, Paul emptied himself of all privilege, and he urged the Philippians to “have this attitude” (v. 15; cf. 2:5). The puzzle is how Paul expected the Philippians to “follow my example” (v. 17), since many of the Philippians were not Jews. How then could they give up Jewish privileges to follow Jesus?

Beginning in chapter 3, Paul conflated Judaism and paganism (as he frequently did). In 3:2, he urged the Philippians to beware of the *katatome*, translated as “false circumcision” in the NASB but actually meaning “mutilation.” Verse 3 makes it clear that Paul was talking about Jews: the contrast is between the *katatome* that the Philippians are supposed to avoid and the *peritome* (“circumcision”) that belongs to those who “worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (or in the lack thereof). Though he is talking about Jews, however, Paul described them in a shocking and utterly pagan manner. Since the new age had come, Jews who continued to cut the flesh of the foreskin were no better than the *castrati* who served pagan temples.

Further, as Wright explains, Paul was mounting a polemic against the imperial ideology, affirming that Jesus, not Caesar, is “Lord” and “Savior,” both prominent terms in imperial propaganda. Paul's claim that Christians are citizens of a heavenly *politeuma* further indicates that the Philippian Christians are to consider themselves a colony of heaven more than as a colony of Rome. Paul imitated Christ by giving up his privileges as a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and he exhorted the Philippians to follow his example by treating their Roman citizenship and attachment to the Roman emperor as “rubbish” for the sake of Christ and His heavenly *politeuma*.



In short: throughout Philippians, which some identify as one of the least political of Paul's letters,<sup>12</sup> Paul was treating the Church as an alternative to the politico-religious organization of the city and of the empire.

## 12

We are ill served by translations that render *politeuo* as “conduct yourself.” By suppressing the political dimensions of such terms, translators betray themselves: they are thoroughly in the grip of Christianity.

## 13

The most common term for the Church in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, the word behind the English *church*. Though frequently etymologized as “the called-out ones,” the word means “assembly,” the “called-together ones,” and, like the other terms we have been examining, was originally a political term.

*Ekklesia* was used in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. There, it described the assembly of Israel for covenant-making at Sinai (Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16), for the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs. 8:14, 22, 55, 65), for public repentance, for dedication of the city after the exile (Neh. 5:7, 13; 7:5, 66), and for other religious and national purposes (Judg. 20:2). At times, it refers to a permanent institution of Israelite social and political life (Deut. 23:1). By taking over the LXX usage, the Church was claiming to be the true assembly of Yahweh, the fulfillment of the Sinai assembly, the people who had returned from exile, and the new nation of Israel.

In the Greek world, *ekklesia* referred to the assembly of citizens of the *polis*. When Aristotle spoke of the sovereign “assembly” in Greek democracy, he spoke of the *ekklesia*.<sup>13</sup> When any important business faced the city-state, the citizens would gather in the theater or other public space as the *ekklesia* to deliberate.

In short: the Church presented herself not as another “sect” or cult that existed under the umbrella of the *polis*; she was an alternative governing body for the city and the beginning of a new city.

## 14

Pagan opponents of the Church have sometimes been more astute sociologists than Christians. Celsus’s objections to the Church have been summarized as follows: “Here was a religious association, however extensive by Tertullian’s calculations, behaving like a nation, lacking a nation’s history and traditions, yet binding its membership to allegiance to traditions and history of its own making.”<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, Christians in the patristic age did have some sense of their “national” and “civic” identity, the fact that they were entering the same “market” as the Roman empire, the Greco-Roman city, and other imperial powers of the ancient world. Aristides compared the Church favorably to other nations when he claimed that Christians were “the ones, beyond all nations, who have found the truth,” and the rhetoric of Christians as the “third race” was common among writers in the second and third centuries.<sup>15</sup>

Apostolic ecclesiology was not entirely maintained, however. Tertullian was inclined to treat the Church as something like a philosophical club,<sup>16</sup> the Alexandrian theologians treated faith as *gnosis*, a perfected form of philosophy, and not a few monks and hermits in the early centuries heard the gospel as a call to forsake the city for the desert.

Already in the patristic era, Christianity was making its appearance.

## 15

Ask the average Christian about the relationship between “church” and “salvation,” and you are likely to get one of two answers:

either (if the Christian is a rather old-fashioned Roman Catholic) that the Church is the reservoir of salvation, to which one must repair to receive grace; or (if the Christian is a rather common sort of evangelical) that salvation occurs apart from the Church, though it is a help along the way.

Despite the apparent differences between these two views, they are fundamentally similar. Both conceive of “salvation” as a something (almost a substance) that can be stored in a reservoir or infused into sinners directly by God. Both believe that the whole point is the salvation of individuals: for the Catholic, the Church is an essential conduit of grace, but salvation is what happens to the individual; for the evangelical, the Church is a nonessential aid to individual salvation. In both cases, Christianity is looming in the background.

Biblically, however, salvation is not a stuff that one can get, whether through the Church, or through some other means. It is not an ether floating in the air, nor a “thing,” nor some kind of “substance.” “Salvation” describes fallen creation reconciled to God, restored to its created purpose, and set on a trajectory leading to its eschatological fulfillment. Ultimately, “salvation” will describe the creation as a whole, once it is restored to God and glorified (Rom. 8:18–25). Grammatically, “salvation” is a noun; theologically, it is always adjectival.

Nor is salvation adjectival merely of individuals. If salvation is the re-creation of man through Christ and the Spirit (which it is), then salvation must be restored relationships and communities as much as individuals. If Christ has not restored human community, if society is not “saved” as much as the individual, then Christ has not restored man as he really is. Salvation must take a social form, and the Church is that social form of salvation, the community that already (though imperfectly) has become the human race as God created it to be, the human race that is becoming what God intends it to be.

The Church is neither a reservoir of grace nor an external support for the Christian life. The Church *is* salvation.

## 16

In our day, physical distances have been compressed by advances in communications and transportation. But have *cultural* distances been compressed? Do we live in a global village?

There is vigorous debate about the answers to those questions. Some deny the existence of a global culture or highlight its limits,<sup>17</sup> while others stress how Western and especially American ways of doing things have affected local cultures throughout the world.<sup>18</sup>

Wherever the sociological truth lies, many believe that a global culture is emerging and that perception is itself an important feature of our world. Even those who embrace global culture, however, recognize that the world does not, as yet, have a “cosmopolis” to provide institutional support for their cosmopolitanism. The absence or weakness of global economic, political, and cultural institutions is a source of concern for globalists. They are not satisfied by global diffusion of musical tastes, clothing styles, films, or the universal desire for jeans and Nikes and baseball caps; they want a global village, with a global mayor and global town council to go with it.

Many Christians are frightened by plans for “one-world” institutional structures, but for all the wrong reasons. The United Nations is *not* a threat because it undermines the sovereignty of the United States. Blue helmets are not important as a challenge to American autonomy any more than the Roman eagle was important because it overthrew the autonomy of the Hellenistic city-states that preceded it. McDonaldization is a problem for Christians, but not primarily because it is gauche (though it is).

Fears like this provide evidence that Christians evaluate the world in terms of Christianity, not in terms of the gospel. If we assume Christianity, globalization is a political (or cultural or economic) rather than a religious concern, and our opposition will be framed in terms of the threat that globalization poses to the current geopolitical (or geo-economic or geo-cultural) realities.

From the viewpoint of the gospel, globalization is a religious *and* political trend, just as the Roman empire was as religious as it was political. Rome was important for the early Christians, however, not because it threatened local cultures but because it was a counterfeit world-empire, which is to say, a counterfeit church. Today, McDonaldization is a challenge to Christians because it involves the spread of Western idolatry of mammon on a global scale. The United Nations is a threat because it is a false church, claiming a false catholicity. Globalists are enemies because they preach a false gospel, an eschatological message of international peace and plenty that will be achieved through liberal political and capitalist economic institutions.

## 17

If we are preaching the gospel faithfully, we will clash with the various, proliferating religions of the “postmodern” world—with Mormons, Hare Krishna, Moonies, and Scientologists. But, we will also be clashing with other “competitors.” The Church’s competitors are nation-states and international political bodies like the United Nations. The Church’s ethos and culture are not just a challenge to other “religions,” but to the ethos of Americanism and the culture of globalization, insofar as such an ethos and culture exist.

But we do not preach the gospel faithfully. We preach Christianity.

And therefore we avoid the clash.

## 18

According to the standard story, modern liberal political order took shape during the early modern period as a response to the savage wars of religion that shook Europe in the decades following the Reformation. Far-sighted politicians concluded it was dangerous to permit theology to dominate or even enter public life.

Religion is irrational, it was argued, and when religious passion invades politics, the only possible result is bloodshed. Better to organize institutions based on universal reason, institutions that will keep the peace. The best way to do that, it was argued, was to push religious and theological claims and issues far to the edges of public life. Privatizing religion was the price of public peace.

On this point, political conservatism and political liberalism are merely variations within a single outlook. All moderns are liberals. Conservative columnist George Will provides a convenient, and appalling, example. America's founders, Will has argued, "wished to tame and domesticate religious passions of the sort that convulsed Europe. They aimed to do so not by establishing religion, but by establishing a commercial republic—capitalism. They aimed to submerge people's turbulent energies in self-interested pursuit of material comforts." In such a system, as Jefferson argued, "'operations of the mind' are not subject to legal coercion, but . . . 'acts of the body' are. Mere belief, said Jefferson, in one god or 20, neither picks one's pockets nor breaks one's legs." Thus, "by guaranteeing free exercise of religions, they would make religions private and subordinate."<sup>19</sup> If Will is correct about the intentions of the American founding, the American church-state settlement is founded on heretical ecclesiology. It is founded on Christianity.

In fact, this is a highly tendentious myth,<sup>20</sup> but the fact that it is the reigning mythology is of historical significance. Of far greater significance, however, is the fact that the Church has, in the main, accepted this mythology as her own. Christians have agreed that we are a petty and volatile bunch, and that it is better if the Church does not exercise too much public responsibility.

My complaint is not that Christians have retreated from "politics" as defined by modernity, and my solution is not that Christians should get off their duffs and become activists. That would simply perpetuate Christianity. Christian political activism

is as modern and worldly as Christian political quietism, since both are based on the (false and heretical) assumption that being the Church is not *already* political activism. Both assume that to be political we need to do *more* than preach and live the gospel.

My complaint is more fundamental: we have accepted our liberal opponents' account of who we are and no longer see that the gospel is an inherently political announcement, nor that the Church is an inherently political community.

Much to the delight of our enemies, we have embraced Christianity and thereby have become acclimated to liberal order, which we should recognize as a thoroughly hostile environment.

## 19

Nothing seems more commonsensical to many Christians than Tillich's suggestion that religion is the heart of culture and culture is "religion externalized." Yet this suggests that religion is not *itself* externalized, that religion exists in the heart or the head, either primarily or exclusively, and only at some second stage, if at all, does religion become external. On this thoroughly modern view, religion is essentially individual and private and only by implication or by outworking is it social and public.

Here it can be seen why politicians might embrace Christianity, for if Christianity is an internal religion, confined to the conscience or the heart, then the world of justice, public finance, education, international relations—in short, most of the world in which we live—is *outside* Christianity, and politicians can engage in their public acts without a second thought to what Jesus might have to do with it.

## 20

Posing the question of "Christianity and culture" makes it appear that we are dealing with two separate things, and that we have to make an effort to show how the two "relate."<sup>21</sup> Framing the

question this way ensures that things are getting off on the wrong foot and will likely never get to the right one.

Taking things from the “Christianity” side: if the Bible teaches that true religion exists only as a heavenly city and holy nation (which it does), then what we are dealing with are not two different kinds of things that need to be “related” but with two cultures that are more or less in conflict.

Biblical religion embraces culture.

Taking things from the “culture” side: all cultural effort—building a skyscraper, painting a portrait, erecting a sculpture in the town square—embodies some desire for a better or more beautiful world. Every invention is a wager for utopia. And this vision of the good and the beautiful is ultimately rooted in a religious commitment. Religious factors are not secondary additions to cultural effort; religious factors are always already there, always incarnate in the cultural pursuits themselves.

Culture always embodies religion.

## 21

David Wells is one of the most prominent recent critics of evangelicalism.<sup>22</sup> Modern social and economic developments—urbanization, industrialization, telecommunications, etc.—have helped to shape a unique consciousness and perspective on life, and this latter is what Wells identifies as “modernity.” Wells rejects the deterministic view that social and economic factors *coerce* certain ideas and attitudes, but he argues that social and economic factors exert a shaping influence on consciousness. Modernity, a perspective on life in which biblical religion seems implausible, is the “vortex” created by the swirling forces of modernization.

Many of the evangelical proponents of the “modernity thesis,” including Wells, explicitly base their analyses on the sociological work of Peter L. Berger. This is a problem. Sociology of religion of the kind that Berger promotes does not merely posit correlations of social and religious factors—as, for example, the



observation that Methodists tend to be middle or lower-middle class while upper classes gravitate to the Episcopal church. Sociology adds to this the belief that the “social” factor has a causative role, and this rests on the prior assumption that “social” and “religious” factors are separable, which is a distinctly modern assumption.

It would be nonsense to ask Moses whether circumcision was a “national” or “religious” rite, since the nation was thoroughly religious in its origins and ethos; it would be nonsensical to ask Aaron whether the penal legislation of the Torah was “religious” or “civil,” since it was manifestly both together. Since the gospel is about the restoration of the human race in Christ, the gospel is a social gospel from the very outset. There is not even a moment when it is merely individual and private, for even Jesus appeared within Israel.

Assuming that religious and social factors can be separated, and assuming that religion is essentially a private experience, sociology of religion is part of a secular “policing” of the boundaries of religion. It is one method for keeping the Church and the gospel in her proper—that is, private—place.<sup>23</sup> Berger’s theory is a method for ensuring the Church remains within the confines of Christianity.

Wells’s assertion that social and religious factors influence each other does not save him from this criticism, for that too is based on the assumption that social and religious factors can be separated and made external to one another at least to the extent that one can “influence” the other. His analysis denies, even if he would not, that social and economic factors are always also religious and ideological factors, that the religious factors are already operative, and conversely that religion is always already social and economic. Contrary to his intentions, Wells’s central sociological assumptions are founded on the very system of secular modernity that he sincerely wishes to challenge.

Hoping to make religion acceptable to its cultured despisers, liberalism was an effort to restate Christian faith in updated modern categories. The defense of liberalism was a (twisted) Pauline defense: to the secular modernist, we become as secular modernists, that we might win the secular modernist. To the extent that the analysis of Wells and others uncritically employ Berger's sociology of religion, they are, far from saving evangelicalism from going the way of liberalism, almost exactly repeating liberalism's most serious errors.

They are assuming Christianity, which is to say, assuming worldliness.

## 22

The notion, popular among "neoconservative" Christians, that the Church is a "mediating institution" that contributes to the construction of a "civil society" between the state and the individual, participates in the same ecclesiological error. The program is well-summarized by George Weigel:

By being itself, the Church also serves a critical demythologizing function in a democracy. That the church's hope is focused on Christ and his kingdom relativizes all worldly expectation and sovereignties, thus erecting a barrier against the coercive politics of worldly utopianism. . . . [B]y locating the finality of our hope (and thus the object of our highest allegiance) in the time beyond time, the Church helps create the space for a free, vigorous, and civil interplay of a variety of proposals for ordering public life, none of which is invested with ultimate authority. Thus Christian eschatology helps to make democracy and the politics of persuasion possible.<sup>24</sup>

Despite his emphasis on the Church, Weigel operates entirely within the constraints imposed by modern liberalism and secularism. Instead of being an alternative social form, a different sort of city, the Church's political role is to aid and abet the play of democratic debate, to contribute to the pluralistic give and

take of civil society. The earthly city's "public life" is the only sort of "public life" that Weigel recognizes; the Church contributes to this public, but is not herself a public. The Church is one sector of a "civil society," rather than a new civil society.

It is no accident that Weigel comes to this political proposal through an eschatology that emphasizes the other-worldliness of our final hope. Though that is true in itself, a failure to see the eschaton realized (by anticipation) here and now in the Church, the failure to grasp the radical alreadiness of the eschaton, permits Weigel to live easily with liberalism and enables him to believe subordination to a larger polity is not an error and a failure for the Church, but the Church's proper public location and calling.<sup>25</sup>

### 23

The gospel is the announcement that the wall is broken down and therefore the Gentiles are welcomed into the community of the new Israel on the same basis as the Jews; thus the gospel *is* sociology and international relations. The gospel is the announcement that God has organized a new Israel, a new *polis*, the Body of Christ, and that the King has been installed in heaven, at the right hand of the Father; thus the gospel *is* politics. The gospel is about the formation of one body in Christ, a body in which each member uses his gifts for the benefit of all, in which each shares the gains and losses of other members, in which each member is prepared to sacrifice his own for the sake of others; thus the gospel announces the formation of a Christian *economy* in the Church.

The gospel announces a new creation.

The gospel brings nothing less than a new world.

If we are going to stand for *this* gospel, we must stand against Christianity.