

DEFENDING CONSTANTINE by Peter J. Leithart
Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010

As the title of his book indicates Peter Leithart attempts to rehabilitate the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, but from a distinctly Protestant perspective. The notion of “Christendom” has been subjected to severe criticism, more especially by Protestant commentators, and is sometimes seen by them as the root cause of all this is wrong with the church today and the author believes that this view needs to be corrected by a closer analysis of the historical evidence.

While not being a Roman or early church historian the author has digested a large number of books on his subject and presents his findings in a fairly evenhanded way, so that Constantine is portrayed as sincere, but cautious and definitely the catalyst that brought about a fundamental change in the Empire, tolling the knell of centuries of paganism with its myriad sacrifices and deeply entwined relationship with grecoroman culture.

The reader who is not familiar with the writings of John Howard Yoder is at a disadvantage because much of the author’s argument is a rebuttal of what appears to be his basically anabaptist theology of the relationship between church and state, ie that no good can come of the attempt to “baptize” the “unbaptizable.”

On his own admission Leithard has two purposes in this book: biographical and polemical and the driving force is the latter as the stated aim is to prove that “Constantine provides in many respects a model for Christian political practice”. However it is not very clear in what respects precisely he could possibly be a model now in completely different historical conditions.

The whole subject of how the church relates to the powers of this world clearly interests a theologian like Tom Wright who provides a commendation on the back cover. Whether, after reading the last chapter, the reader will come to the conclusion that Leithart has, in fact, constructed a *coherent* historical or theological argument on the subject I beg leave to doubt. He formulates an argument that appears to link the elimination of animal sacrifice in the Roman Empire with the demands for human sacrifice made by the modern state which is neither coherent nor convincing.

David George