

Resisting the Empire: Fidelity to the Gospel of Life

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Abstract: The act of discerning a proper Christian response to the aggrandizing claims and dehumanizing violence of empires stands to benefit greatly from an analysis of history. Those with eyes to see can discern striking parallels between the imperial ethos of ancient Rome and that of modern America, including a shared cult of the executive, an ethic of peace through conquest, and cultural values best described as a fundamental orientation toward death. By observing how the church of the first three centuries

responded to the hegemonic ideology of Rome, Christians living under the shadow of the modern American empire can learn vital strategies for resisting the inherent violence of the imperial ethos. These responses, including exposing the empire's fraudulent claims of power and prestige, and clinging faithfully to a consistent ethic of life, serve as bulwarks of faithfulness for the church's efforts to serve Jesus Christ.

Resisting the Imperial Twins: Fidelity to the Gospel of Life

I. Introduction

On the 4th of April, 1967, exactly a year to the day before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a gathered meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned, a religious coalition assembled to oppose the policies of the Johnson administration in Vietnam. This particular evening, King was not speaking on equal civil rights or race relations, as had been his wont for over a decade; he had come at last to break his silence on the Vietnam War. Relating his decision to finally “come out” publicly against the war, King explained that it was intimately tied up with his work on behalf of civil rights and racial justice. While counseling those who wanted to use violence to advance the cause of equal rights against their actions, King was asked why *they* shouldn't when the United States government was using massive violence to advance its own interests in Vietnam. In effect, why can the empire do it with all its massive military might, while we who are powerless and voiceless can not?

“Their questions hit home,” King admitted, “and I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today- *my own government.*”¹ Consistency demanded that as a Christian leader, King could no longer preach nonviolence in the struggle for racial justice while remaining silent in the face of

¹Martin Luther King, “A Time to Break Silence,” in James Melvin Washington, ed., *A Testimony of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), pp.231-252 at p. 233 (emphasis mine).

the violence perpetrated by those whose employment of destructive force and killing power was exponentially greater than that of those who had been trampled underfoot.

Beyond this need for consistency and a unified approach for opposing the violence that defied the Beloved Community he sought after,² King's denouncement of the disproportionate violence of the American military also falls into a long and venerable tradition of Christian prophetic denouncement of imperial absolutism, stretching back to the lonely voices of the Israelite prophets, St. John's Apocalypse, St. Paul's subversive theology, and Jesus' proclamation of the advent of the kingdom of God. Implicit at the very core of the Christian faith is the announcement of a new world order characterized by the kenotic cross, rather than by the imperial sword. This announcement threatens the might of the kingdoms of the world, based as they are on force and compulsion; they are threatened by revolutionary weapons from God which, in the words of Paul, "are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Empires rise and empires fall, and their effects are felt the world over, but their heart and characteristics remain the same, even across the millennia. In many ways, the America whose violence Dr. King denounced in 1967 is every bit as hegemonic as the Rome denounced by Paul and the apocalyptic rhetoric of Revelation. This comparison is becoming increasingly common, especially as the United States moves ever closer to conforming itself with the Roman imperial ideal. *Vanity Fair* editor and cultural critic Cullen Murphy argues forcefully in his recent book *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007) that the imperial shoe is fitting the

²Besides the numerous mentions of the beloved community theme in King's own writings and speeches, see also Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (Basic Books, 2005).

United States now better than ever before.³ Likewise, John Dominic Crossan's textual and archaeological research into Paul's message and context⁴ contains an unmistakable subtext in which Paul's proclamation of Jesus Christ in defiance of Caesar's claims to power and authority is used as a foil through which Crossan also critiques the foundations of the American empire. The parallels are not difficult to discern. Rome, he argues, was not an exceptional evil in the world any more than America is today. Rather, Rome represented to Paul the status quo of the current world order, which was being overthrown by Jesus Christ.

But, how are *we* to respond? How is the church to remain faithful to Jesus Christ in the midst of an empire whose own worship of death⁵ would seek to stifle the life-giving message of Jesus Christ? This is the task of this paper. In this study, we will

³Murphy identifies six parallels he believes justify his conclusion: (1.) Washington D.C is increasingly viewed in the same way that Rome was in the era when "all roads lead to Rome"; (2.) The unchallenged global military might of the twin empires began to be stretched thin, with Rome seeking help from the barbarians and America seeking help from Blackwater and Haliburton; (3.) The administrative corruption that consumed Rome from the inside out is increasingly mirrored in the unprecedented privatization (and very frequent corruption) of American assets; (4.) Both empires' attitude toward outsiders has been at the same time paternalistic, condescending, and characterized by delusions of benevolence, while at the same time being marked by a deep suspicion and even fear of those they quixotically sought to benefit via their magnanimity; (5.) Imperial borders serve less as dividing lines and more as nebulous frontiers through which outsiders are assimilated by the millions (e.g. what the Rhine and the Danube were for Rome, the Rio Grande is for America); and (6.) As empires overextend themselves they become increasingly difficult to govern, regulate, and maintain, leading to ever-increasing instability.

⁴John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).

⁵William Stringfellow, widely credited with bringing the "powers of principalities" language of the New Testament back into theological vogue as a relevant critique of imperial truth-claims, makes the startling claim in his *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1973) that "death is incarnate in the ethos of each nation, embodied in the traditions and aims of all the nations and powers" (p. 67). Death, he argues, becomes the self-serving moral purpose of the fallen powers and principalities. In the American context, the annihilation bombings of World War II including Hiroshima and Dresden, and the multifaceted service of death in Vietnam (measuring victory in body counts, dropping chemical poisons indiscriminately on the countryside from airplanes, etc.) go to demonstrate "the moral presence of death which has *always* been in America, as in other principalities" (p. 70). As we continue in this study, we will note more ways in which the worship of death is a characteristic hallmark of empire, including its Roman and American incarnations.

journey through time and text, noting the characteristics of the imperial phenomenon which has become so relevant in modern America, and attempt to discern a Christian response, employing the wisdom of those disciples of Christ who have gone before us in a context not too dissimilar from our own. In Part II, we will lay out the characteristics of the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace which was both lauded and feared by the ancients (depending of course on one's place within the empire or without), and then note some ways in which modern America has tended to mirror the imperial ethos of Rome. This will illustrate the contextual parallels in which we find ourselves joined with the Christians of old, and demonstrate the relevance of their ancient and faithful witness. Part III will then explore the Christian responses to the Roman Empire of old, including subversion of the imperial ideology, a transformed political identity, and a distinctive set of virtues and practices which demarked the *ekklesia* from the *imperium*. Finally in Part IV, we will draw upon what we have observed from the Christian responses to the empire of the *first* century in order to suggest some ways Christians of the *twenty-first* century might respond in faith to the American imperial ethos that is so indebted to that of Rome.⁶ How is a disciple of the crucified Jesus to respond to a cultural ethos which so closely mirrors the imperial ethos that crucified him?

II. Imperial Horizons, Then and Now

⁶The ethos of ancient Rome is, of course, not reflected *only* in modern America; it is, to greater and lesser degrees, shared by every political nation in the world that partakes in the nature of the fallen powers and principalities. My stress as a religious and cultural critic of the United States in this paper is not intended as an exoneration of other nations. Rather, I concentrate specifically on America here for two reasons: (1.) the frequency with which America is likened to an "empire" or "superpower" on the world stage lends comparisons to Rome (the "superpower" of its day) more immediacy and relevance than they would for any other modern nation, and (2.) I write as a citizen of the very culture and empire I am critiquing, placing me in the tradition of "critique from within" I mentioned above. I could not critique the imperialist tendencies of a Russia, or a China, for example, with any integrity if I had not first run my own society through that same analysis.

Political Loyalty and the Cult of the Executive

The Son of God was born into the world of Caesar Augustus, who (not coincidentally) was also called the (or “a”) “son of god.” It was a world whose chief power and predominant social force was the overwhelming might of Rome. Rome lurks everywhere in the background of the New Testament, including Luke’s situating of Jesus’ birth in the time of Caesar Augustus (Lk. 2:1), the zealots and other insurrectionists who armed themselves against Roman oppression, the procurator and soldiers who put Jesus to death, and the very heart of darkness in which Paul’s missionary journeys culminate in Acts 28. The New Testament does not however, give its readers a full description or cataloguing of Rome’s brutalities and degeneracies, since the first readers of the Scriptures would have been well-aware of them, having lived in their midst. We however, separated by two millennia of history, not to mention widespread ignorance of that ancient imperial history, are not as in tune with the heavy theopolitical and anti-imperial thrust of the New Testament because we are often unfamiliar with the character of that empire. In this Part, we will examine the claims and attributes of the empire which the Christians opposed with their proclamation of the alternative political order of the kingdom of God,⁷ and then see what parallels can be drawn to our present-day reality in order to better understand the challenges that face us as Christians in the twenty-first century. Some of these similarities will be of the more cosmetic variety, such as parallels in the imperial symbolism used, but these only serve to underscore and make explicit the deeper parallels in governmental and societal ethos that can be discerned at the heart of the imperial identity.

⁷On the political nature of the kingdom of God (which is “political” in a very different sense than we usually imagine, see John Howard Yoder’s now-classic study, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1972).

The Rome of the first century was not the Republic of the preceding centuries. Julius Caesar and his protégé Octavian (the later Augustus Caesar), had transformed it from an ostensibly representative democracy with the real power residing in the Senate and with the Consuls into an autocratic dictatorship of the truest form. Despite the fact that the vestiges of Republican rule remained in that the Senate had not been dissolved outright, the entire weight of imperial government, legislative, judicial, and executive, was personified in the emperor. The word of the emperor was unchallengeable,⁸ and as the years progressed, more and more earthly power was invested in his person until he was even attributed with heavenly power.

The imperial cult was the glue that held the *imperium* together, the symbol of patriotism and loyalty that bound all citizens to emperor and state.⁹ We should be careful however not to unduly stress the religious component of the cult of the emperor. Religious and political claims were (as they are today!) inextricably intertwined. To declare the emperor divine¹⁰ was to declare one's absolute loyalty to the emperor. It meant that the emperor was sovereign, that the heavens which had ordained his power had also ordained your servitude to his power. There was an "aura of supernatural legitimation" for the empire that "came to be enshrined in and expressed through the figure of the monarch."¹¹ This had the concrete effect of reinforcing the distinction

⁸except by insurrection and assassination, both of which would occur frequently in the coming centuries.

⁹Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987), p. 50.

¹⁰In Latin, there is a distinction between a *deus*, an eternal god like Jupiter, and a *divus*, a human being who had been deified, such as Julius Caesar. The Latin inscriptions which survive from the era almost always employ the latter to describe the emperors, but in Greek, both words are translated with *theos*. Hence titles such as *dei filius* (Son of a God) and *divi filius* (Son of a Divine One) are both translated in Greek as *huios theou* ("Son of God"). See Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, p. 11.

¹¹Warren Carter, "Vulnerable Power: The Roman Empire Challenged by the Early Christians" in Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime, Paul-Andre Turcotte, eds., *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (Walnut Creek, Calif: AltaMira Press, 2002) pp. 453-488 at p. 462 (citing J. Rufus Fears).

between subjugator and subjugated, for as Warren Carter puts it: “Religious claims and rituals were deeply woven into this imperial world. Given that words and ritual have performative qualities, propaganda from elite warriors and rituals carried out in the imperial cult gave form to the relationship of power between subject and ruler.”¹²

Allegiance to Caesar was thus reinforced through these rituals. Falling out of favor with the divine Caesar spelled disaster for the unfortunate individual and meant the end of a career, and often of one’s life. This is alluded to in John’s gospel, where, according to the narrative, the final insult which convinces Pilate to hand Jesus over for crucifixion is the accusation by the crowds that he is “no friend of Caesar” (Jn. 19:12). Similarly, the second decade of the second century provides us with a window into imperial persecution of the Christians that had more to do with patriotism and allegiance to the empire than it did with the Romans really caring which god(s) their subjects worshipped. Pliny the Younger, in a famous correspondence with the emperor Trajan, recounts an incident in which an anonymous list of alleged Christians had been circulated. Pliny tells his imperial patron that he had “interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed.” Those who had relented or who denied being Christians however, “invoked the gods in words dictated by me, offered prayer with incense and wine to your [Trajan’s] image, which I had ordered to be brought for this purpose together with statues of the gods, and moreover cursed Christ.” In this way, Pliny ensured the loyalty of a number of imperial subjects, who “worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.”¹³

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 10.96-97 (Cited from <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/pliny.html>). See also Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, p. 50.

The cult of the emperor was a ritual of loyalty, a persuasive piece of propaganda designed to remind the imperial subjects who was really in charge.

Are there ways in which this cultus has reappeared on the American stage? Surprisingly a number of parallels can be discerned by those with ears to hear. In the first place, American presidents are often accorded similar religious devotion, masked as patriotism. While the cultus is no longer so overt as to compel prostration or make offerings before the image of a president,¹⁴ remarkable parallels between contemporary American practice and ancient Roman practice can be observed.

We need look no further than our money for the first overt parallel. Roman currency always bore the image of the emperor on at least one side.¹⁵ Some coinage from the Augustan era depict the goddess Pax (Peace) on one side complete with cornucopia and olive branch, while on the other side, Augustus stands proudly in full military regalia, sometimes atop a horde of vanquished foes.¹⁶ His visage was always accompanied by the proclamation that he is *divi filius*, “Son of the Divine One” (Julius Caesar).¹⁷ The coins thus reinforced the cult of the emperor and extolled his mighty achievements, all the while reminding everyone who bought and sold anything of who their master was.¹⁸ American currency is similarly bedecked with the visages of American presidents. In

¹⁴Although, see the 2006 documentary film *Jesus Camp* for one startling and disturbing exception!

¹⁵Recall Mk. 12:16 here.

¹⁶Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, pp 11-12.

¹⁷Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, p. 91.

¹⁸In Jesus’ dispute with the Pharisees over paying taxes to Caesar, he explicitly draws the question of political loyalty out into the forefront by holding up a denarius as the sign of what “belongs to Caesar.” We need not venture here into the complex interpretive debate over precisely what the “render unto Caesar” pericope would have meant. For our purposes, we need only note the heavy political and religious connotations of the Roman coinage and the fierce reactions these images would have provoked on the part of pious Jewish nationalists.

case the religio-political overtones of the images themselves were missed by the American public, American currency has, since the Coinage Act of 1864, borne the inscription “In God We Trust,” which in 1956 was codified as the official national motto. This not-so-subtle merging of the political image of the presidents with the religious declaration that we (and by extension, the president depicted on the coin) trust in God is an ingenious furthering of the presidential cultus which we, like the ancient Romans, have enshrined on the face of our true god, Mammon.

Along the lines of the cult of the executive, another parallel can be seen in the massive temples and statues constructed in Rome to honor Julius Caesar, Augustus, and their successors. Throughout the great urban centers of the empire, large temples and monuments were constructed to the adoration and worship of the emperor, including one in Caesarea, complete with statues of Augustus, Trajan, and Hadrian which “testify to the continued worship of the emperor in that temple.”¹⁹ Anyone who has ever visited Washington D.C. for any length of time cannot help but notice the gigantic Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, complete with colossal statues of the two towering figures in American history, places where visitors can come to reflect and venerate the memory of America’s very own *divae*.²⁰ These memorials are, like much of the architecture

¹⁹Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, pp. 196-197.

²⁰America’s current *divus* and chief executive has greatly increased both the frequency and nature of his appeals to the divine. Whereas many past presidents have invoked God at various points throughout their terms of office, George W. Bush appears to be the first to continually represent a robust confidence that he is on God’s side. A recent news report has President Bush telling a gathered summit of Palestinian civic ministers: “I am driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, ‘George go and fight these terrorists in Afghanistan’. And I did. And then God would tell me ‘George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq’. And I did. And now, again, I feel God’s words coming to me, ‘Go get the Palestinians their state and get the Israelis their security, and get peace in the Middle East.’ And, by God, I’m gonna do it.” (Cited from Ewen MacAskill, “George Bush: ‘God told me to end the tyranny in Iraq,’” *The Guardian* October 7, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/oct/07/iraq.usa>).

throughout the capital, built in the neo-classical style which intentionally mimics the architectural style of ancient Greece and Rome, further accentuating the parallels.

Additional significant parallels can be found in the various civic-religious rites and rituals of the two empires here under scrutiny. Crossan points out an inscription found on a stele near the Black Sea, dating from 3 B.C.E., an oath which was sworn by all people of the region by “the command of Caesar Augustus, the son of god”:

I swear by Zeus, the Earth, the Sun, and by all the gods and goddesses including Augustus himself, to be favorable to Caesar Augustus, his sons and his descendants forever, in speech, in actions, and in thoughts, considering as friends those he considers so, and regarding as enemies those he judges so, and to defend their interests I will spare neither body, nor soul, nor life, nor my children...²¹

This sort of civic rite, infused with a healthy dose of imperial theology, brings to mind a similar oath of loyalty which may be more familiar to us...

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

In both of these oaths, the swearer promises undying loyalty to the nation. In the first, that loyalty is invested in the person of Caesar Augustus and his successors (in whose person the entirety of the state was believed to rest), whereas in the second, the loyalty is invested in the flag, the symbol of the nation.²² Both of them are injected with the pomp

²¹Cited in Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, p. 206.

²²The later insertion of “under God” into the American Pledge of Allegiance by the Eisenhower administration makes the religious component of this ostensibly political oath explicit, deepening its likeness to and connection with the Augustan oath of loyalty.

and circumstance of civil religion, and both of them are virtually compulsory in some circumstances.

Peace through Victory: The Ethos of Conquest

In the first century, Rome enjoyed unparalleled domination throughout the known world militarily, economically, and culturally. In this section, we will see how empires then and now throw their weight around via the sword and the purse, before moving on to describe the cultural values of an empire in the next section. Along the way, we will continue to note some of the striking similarities between the *modus operandi* of ancient Rome and that of the United States of America.

Rome's power and influence were maintained through an exceptionally disciplined and fearsome fighting force. The Roman legions were used to conquer foreign lands during the empire's expansionist years, maintain law and order at home, and secure peace along the imperial borders. The quality of this "peace" however, is not what we might expect. Roman peace (the famous *Pax Romana*) was secured and maintained through the use and threat of overwhelming military force. Augustus had written in his *Acts* that "victories had secured peace," an attitude which was to define the imperial conception of how peace was to be achieved and the quality of that peace for millennia to come. This peace was imperial to its very core, and was imposed by weaponry. Augustus makes the connection between peace and military might explicit in his *Res Gestae*: "I extended the boundaries of all the provinces which were bordered by races not subject to our empire. The provinces of the Gauls, the Spains, and Germany *I reduced to a state of peace.*"²³ As Crossan puts it,

²³Cited in Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, p. 18 (emphasis mine).

Blessed were those who waged war to obtain peace. And Roman *pax* was not a static quality or simply the absence of war, but a dynamic pursuit that demanded constant vigilance and permanent willingness to do battle against the enemy. *Pax* was not just something that was, but something you did.²⁴

The goddess Pax was likewise frequently depicted in imperial art as holding a spear or other implements of war. While Mars was the god of battle, Pax was the goddess of what came after the battle.

The Pax Romana was certainly a compelling vision; it captivated the minds of the ancients as no ideology before had ever done. The material and social benefits brought by Roman rule for the vanquished, including marvelous roads, aqueducts, education, and a semblance of security, contributed to their warm reception by many of their conquered subjects. The Jewish resistance commander turned Roman sympathizer Flavius Josephus was “so impressed... by the power of Rome that he virtually claimed that God supported the right of the stronger which he had just proclaimed. Therefore the Jewish rebels were ‘waging war not only against the Romans but also against God.’”²⁵

Because of the educational and technological benefits life under Rome’s iron fist could yield for the conquered, the Romans viewed themselves as benevolent dictators, tolerating no opposition, but bestowing blessings on those whom they ruled. They believed that Roman rule was in the interests of everyone involved, an attitude which contributed to the sense of manifest destiny Roman conquests had come to gather.

To Romans the glory of their empire was even greater than that which Pericles could claim for Athens, because they had come to think that it properly embraced the whole world. Moreover, their dominion was

²⁴Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 100.

²⁵Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, p. 15.

ordained by the gods, whose favor Rome had deserved by piety and justice, and it was exercised in the interests of the subjects... The Athenians too had liked to see themselves as protectors of peoples unjustly threatened or oppressed, and as benefactors of their subjects; it seems very doubtful if many of them acknowledged publicly or in their own hearts that their empire was a tyranny and unjustly acquired. What was most novel in the Roman attitude to their empire was a belief that it was universal and willed by the gods.²⁶

This absolute confidence in the rightness of their cause is also demonstrated in the “freedom” they believed was bestowed on their subjects through their rule. Aelius Aristedes praised the freedom granted by the Roman empire this way: “Of all those who ever possessed an empire, you alone rule over people who are free.”²⁷ Freedom imposed through subjugation is a curious sort of freedom; the Romans boasted of the freedom they gave because their subjects were, by and large, free from banditry, civil strife, and insurrection because of the Roman rule. The ancient coin mentioned above with Pax on one side and Augustus on the other bears the inscription under Augustus “protector of the freedom of the Roman people.” As Wengst puts it, “Roman freedom and peace based on force of arms are indeed two sides of the same coin.”²⁸ For non-Romans, this “freedom” involved servitude.

Can we speak of a like attitude toward peace through victory and force of arms?

We need not look very hard. On the evening of September 11th 2001, President Bush addressed an anxious and terrified nation via television.²⁹ He noted that “our way of life,

²⁶Peter A. Brunt, *Imperialism in the Ancient World* (1978, P Garsney and C. Whittaker, eds). Cited in Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, p. 404.

²⁷Cited in Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, p. 22.

²⁸Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, p. 24.

²⁹A transcript of the President’s speech is here:

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/military/terroristattack/bush_speech.html

our very freedom came under attack” by the terrorists, who had “targeted [us] for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” Freedom is perhaps the most cherished American ideal. But how was that freedom to be secured? “Immediately following the first attack,” the President continued, “I implemented our government's emergency response plans. Our military is powerful, and it's prepared.” Notice the implicit connection between military power and freedom, as we observed in the accolades of the Roman Empire. Perhaps most telling of all however is the blatant conflation of peace and military force (whether threatened or actual), when the President told the nation, “This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time.” In practical reality, this is no different than Augustus’ claims we have already observed that his “victories had secured peace,” or that conquered territories had been “reduced to a state of peace.” One is reminded of the wry old cynic’s adage that killing for the sake of peace is like fornicating for the sake of chastity. Further examples of an American empire intent on securing peace through war are numerous,³⁰ so we need not multiply them here. American peace, as with Roman peace, is won by vanquishing foes. The mantle of the *Pax Romana* has been taken up by the *Pax Americana*.

Roman hegemony was also maintained through the use of economic pressure. “Control over the land, those who work it, and its product is effected not only through conquest, booty, seizure, and confiscation but also through local and imperial taxes, tributes, rents and services.”³¹ Luke’s gospel relates how Caesar Augustus decreed a

³⁰On October 7th of that same year, during his address to the nation explaining the invasion of Afghanistan, the President declared that “The battle is now joined on many fronts. We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail.”

³¹Carter, “Vulnerable Power,” in Duhaime, Blasi, and Turcotte, *Handbook of Early Christianity*, p. 457.

census throughout “the entire Roman world” (Luke 2:1); such a census was not merely a means for counting the empire’s population or tracing demographics, it was a means of asserting social control over the captured peoples because it was done in advance of heavy imperial taxation. The conquest of new lands and the continued subjugation of others were to bring the empire great riches. Rome stripped Judea and other lands of their resources and wealth, and while some of it did remain in the provinces in the forms of the fine architecture, roads, and aqueducts (many of which still stand today), a larger portion was funneled back to Rome itself, to fund the opulence of palaces and temples, and to perpetuate the decadent lifestyle members of Rome’s elite classes enjoyed.³² While American economic power is not so overt as demanding tribute or taxation from foreign lands, large corporations, effectively acting as surrogates of the state,³³ extend their businesses abroad in the hope of enriching their American shareholders at the expense of those of other nations. As a result, the income gap between rich and poor, both inside the United States and around the globe, is widening at unprecedented levels.³⁴

In sum, we have observed that ancient Rome and modern America share a common ethos concerning the establishment and maintenance of peace that can best be

³²Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, pp. 33-34.

³³For example, the vast number of private contractors inside Iraq at present indicates the extent to which the U.S. government has hired out the job of rebuilding what it has broken. According to a recent Associated Press report (Richard Lardner. “In Iraq, private contractors outnumber U.S. troops.” *The Seattle Times*, Thursday, September 20, 2007), well-over 180,000 private contractors are currently stationed in Iraq, outnumbering even the post- “surge” number of American soldiers inside that country. Corporations such as Blackwater USA are paid for doing the work of the United States, serving as surrogates and proxy agents.

³⁴The pursuit of the almighty dollar has caused many American corporations to relocate production facilities overseas, where workers in such countries as China, Vietnam, and Thailand labor under conditions American workers would find intolerable for microscopic wages that often fail to meet what is needed to match even the local standard of living. Websites such as <http://www.sweatshopwatch.org> document the abuses of foreign labor that go into lining the corporate coffers of multinational corporations such as Nike and Walmart.

described as “peace through victory.” It is thought by the rulers of both empires that the best way to bring about peace and stability is by crushing opposition through the use, or the threat of use, of military might. Both empires maintain their own form of military-industrial complex³⁵ with the intent of imposing and maintaining a sort of “peace” at the end of a sword or the barrel of a gun. As Wengst notes in his study of the *Pax Romana*, “Peace produced and maintained by military force is accompanied with streams of blood and tears of unimaginable proportions.”³⁶ Later, we will come to see how the early Christians responded to the *Pax Romana* in the first century, but now we must turn our attention to the shared cultural values and virtues that empires exhibit.

The Morals and Virtues of Imperial Subjects

In an empire whose government places so much trust for so much good in conquest and violence, is it any wonder that the empire’s citizens are similarly enamored of violence? Roman society was extraordinarily violent, even by today’s standards. Stretching from violence against infants and the unborn, to violence as sport, to violence in civic artwork, it is no overstatement to say that Roman society was saturated with blood. Although there were a number of moralists and philosophers pushing for moderation and sobriety in Roman culture, their voices were largely drowned out by the libertines and hedonists. In this section, we will look specifically at one area in which Roman virtues (or lack thereof) are being increasingly mirrored in contemporary American culture- violence.

³⁵This term comes from a somber warning from President Dwight D. Eisenhower in his presidential farewell address to the nation in which he admonished the nation to “we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.” He foresaw the disastrous consequences that would result were the new “conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry” to be permitted to take on a life of its own. Cited from: <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/ike.htm>

³⁶Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, p. 13.

Perhaps as a result of the violence required to maintain the *Pax Romana*, Roman culture was bathed in blood. Public artwork adorning temples, palaces, government buildings, and even private homes depicted scenes of Roman glory- battles between armies, gladiatorial death matches, scenes of torture, mythological battles and conflicts, animals devouring each other, etc. These pervasive scenes of bloodshed and slaughter had predictable results on the populace who viewed them daily:

These artistic representations must have created a level of desensitization that enabled the inhabitants to view the real thing. Public executions were carried out in the most brutal way possible, and public games featured varying forms of violent entertainment: animal against animal, animal against gladiator, gladiator against gladiator, and execution of criminals by animal attack and whatever other ingenious ways could be thought up, often the enactment of the same mythological stories of torture and death depicted in sculpture and painting.³⁷

The Roman populace was indifferent to, if not openly cheering for, violence against those deemed of less worth- including criminals, gladiators, slaves, and foreign captives. Death matches were treated as sport and were far and away the most popular events at the games.³⁸ Even the chariot racing, while not intentionally a bloodsport, was frequently fatal to the participants, much to the crowd's delight.

It was yet another form of violence and devaluation of human life which was more of an everyday reality for the average Roman citizen than was the bloodsport of the games- infanticide and abortion. As it had been for the Greeks, the killing of unwanted or deformed infants (whether in the womb or after birth) was commonplace in Roman society. It was practiced for both reasons of population control (primarily among the

³⁷Carolyn Osiek, "Family Matters," in Richard A. Horsely, ed., *Christian Origins* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2005), pp. 201-220 at p. 206.

³⁸Cf. Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998).

poor), but also for cosmetic reasons among the rich who often wanted to preserve their “sex appeal.”³⁹ Infants were commonly subject to the practice of exposure, in which they were simply abandoned on a rural mountainside to die.⁴⁰ Abortions of unborn infants were carried out almost as frequently, using a number of mechanical or chemical⁴¹ means. In Greek and Roman law, all rights, including the right to life, “were subservient to the welfare of the state (or the family, the religion, or the race) and had to be sacrificed if the best interests of the state demanded it.”⁴² Roman law, especially as codified in the Twelve Tables, recognized the father of the family, the *paterfamilias*, as head of household. For the *paterfamilias*, “his slaves, wife, and children were all ‘taken in hand,’ *mancipia*, to him, and he had the power of life and death, *jus vitae necisque*, over them all. The *paterfamilias* could kill, mutilate and sell people like possessions.”⁴³ Against such a backdrop, the slaughter of Bethlehem’s boys as ordered by Rome’s puppet king Herod (Matthew 2:16) is not such an inscrutably large leap. Gorman’s comments aptly sum up the moral situation throughout the empire at the time of Jesus: “When Octavian (later called Caesar Augustus) appeared on the political scene, the Roman Republic was in disastrous moral and economic straits. The practice of abortion, which had reached an

³⁹Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish, and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World*, (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 15.

⁴⁰As an example of this practice in the popular culture of the day, Greek dramatist Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex* relates the story of a tragic hero who had been left to die of exposure as an infant.

⁴¹The various herbal compounds and recipes which had been discovered to be abortifacient by Greco-Roman physicians were generally called “poisons” throughout the ancient literature (See Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church*, p. 15). It seems quite plain that they realized they were killing a human being, they just didn’t care.

⁴²Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church*, p. 23.

⁴³*Ibid.*

unprecedented height in the first century B.C., remained at a high rate throughout that century and the next.”⁴⁴

Any casual observer of American culture will note that the situation is not particularly different here in 21st century imperial America. Our culture has grown increasingly violent in recent years, with over 15,000 homicides taking place every year since 1970.⁴⁵ On parallel with the violence of Roman civic art, American entertainment media is replete with depictions of violence and bloodshed. The 1994-1995 Television Violence Monitoring Project from UCLA’s Center for Communication Policy found that

- 61 percent of television programs contain some violence, and only 4 percent of television programs with violent content feature an "antiviolence" theme.
- 44 percent of the violent interactions on television involve perpetrators who have some attractive qualities worthy of emulation.
- 43 percent of violent scenes involve humor either directed at the violence or used by characters involved with violence.
- Nearly 75 percent of violent scenes on television feature no immediate punishment for or condemnation of violence.

The report notes that many television programs fail to depict the harmful consequences of violence. Specifically, it finds that of all violent behavioral interactions on television, 58 percent depict no pain, 47 percent depict no harm, and 40 percent depict harm unrealistically. Of all violent scenes on television, 86 percent feature no blood or gore. Only 16 percent of violent programs feature the long-term, realistic consequences of violence.⁴⁶

Americans are becoming increasingly desensitized to violence, like our imperial forbearers in Rome were. Gun ownership has reached all-time highs, violent video games

⁴⁴Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church*, p. 26.

⁴⁵According to the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/tables/totalstab.htm>

⁴⁶Television Violence Monitoring Project, quoted in this paper and summarized at <http://www.safeyouth.org/scripts/faq/mediaviolstats.asp>, and cited in full at <http://www.digitalcenter.org/webreport94/toc.htm>

such as Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto* franchise are more popular than ever, and high school and college students are killing one another in what should be sanctuaries of learning. Additionally, since the legalization of abortion in the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision of 1973, more than 45 million surgical abortions have been performed;⁴⁷ that's about the entire population of the Roman Empire under Caesar Augustus!⁴⁸

Radical Catholic priest and anti-war protestor Daniel Berrigan once spoke of an “interlocking directorate of death that binds the whole culture,” stretching from the Pentagon to the abortion clinic. By this striking phrase, he meant “an unspoken agreement that we will solve our problems by killing people in various ways; a declaration that certain people are expendable, outside the pale.”⁴⁹ Berrigan's comments have only grown more relevant as the years have gone on. From the culture's militarism to the disregard for the lives of the unborn, we have discovered one of the strongest common threads tying the twenty-first century American empire to that of first-century Rome- an embrace of the normalcy of human violence and a fundamental orientation toward death.

We have now observed a number of the ways in which the United States of America has come to mirror the ethos and ideology of the ancient Roman Empire. This is not to suggest that there are *no* substantive differences between Rome and the USA; the imperial years of Rome, for example, had no democratic structures in place through which the “voice of the people” might be expressed. At its core however, the underlying

⁴⁷The Alan Guttmacher Institute, an information clearinghouse on abortion, says that “From 1973 through 2005, more than 45 million legal abortions occurred.”
http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html

⁴⁸According to “Roman Empire Population,” <http://www.unrv.com/empire/roman-population.php>

⁴⁹Rev. Daniel Berrigan, S.J., interview by Lucien Miller, *Reflections* (Amherst, Mass.), vol. 2, no. 4 (Fall 1979).

ethos of empire is easily discernable by those who are looking for it. Some of the parallels are so striking that the rising comparisons between Rome and a modern-day American empire are not surprising. Despite the two millennia separating us from the Romans, our horizons are not dissimilar. We close this Part with Crossan's articulate indictment of the situation now facing us. Rome, he says,

was not the evil empire of its ancient time. Rome was not the axis of evil in its Mediterranean place. Rome was not the worst thing that had ever happened to its preindustrial world. Rome was simply the normalcy of civilization within first-century options and the inevitability of globalization within first-century limits. Rome was maybe even the cutting-edge of civilization, although hear in the background snickers from the Han Chinese at the other end of the Silk Road. But this is the crucial point for this book. Who they were there and then, we are here and now. We are, at the start of the twenty-first century, what the Roman Empire was at the start of the first century. Put succinctly: Rome and the East there, America and the West here. Put more succinctly: they then, we now. Put most succinctly: SPQR is SPQA.⁵⁰

III. Early Christian Responses to Empire

Having discerned some of the many parallels between our imperial horizons, we turn now from the descriptive task to the applicative. How are confessing Christians to remain faithful to Jesus Christ in the midst of the powers of empire which would seduce us and make us compromise our loyalty? It is a vexing task, but we have companions in our journey.

For the first three centuries of its existence, the Christian church lived under the iron fist of imperial Rome, a marginalized and persecuted political and faith community. As we have seen, their world was not particularly different from our own,⁵¹ in that we are both surrounded by the “superpowers” of their ages, imperial Rome and imperial

⁵⁰Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, p. 412.

America. Their words and deeds then, in dealing with their own imperial context as faithful Christians shall be instructive to us, who are attempting to do the same in an empire which eerily mirrors that of Rome in so many ways. We will draw on their wisdom in order to discern a way forward to live faithfully as the Church of Jesus Christ in imperial exile.

Subverting Imperial Ideology

As we observed at the outset of Part II, one of the main roots of Roman power and hegemony was its ideology of divinely ordained manifest destiny, the cult of the emperor, and the civic rituals which reinforced this religio-political regime. The early Christians, living under the pagan empire, attacked this ideology on all fronts, and together with their Jewish brothers and sisters, remained one of the very few groups within the empire that actively resisted Roman domination in those early centuries. Christian resistance to the powers was fierce, but it was not violent. Instead of resistance by armed revolt or via financial pressures such as boycotts and tax resistance, the Christian resistance was centered on “an alternative social organization and persuasive theological worldview.”⁵²

The first thing to notice about the Christians’ resistance to Roman ideology is the language used to positively construct their theological worldviews. The New Testament is replete with language that, read against the backdrop of Roman theological claims, serves to radically undercut Roman claims to ultimacy. In Part II, we observed that Caesar

⁵¹We must leave aside for the moment the issue of Christianity as the dominant culture of the empire, as it is in modern America and in Rome after the ascent of Constantine. Our main concern in this Part is with the Christian responses to the pagan and persecuting Roman Empire of the first three centuries, and while the situation is somewhat different in that the large majority of American culture self-identifies as Christian, the situations are actually rather analogous, but this brief discussion must be postponed until the end of this study.

⁵²Carter, “Vulnerable Power,” in Duhaime, Blasi, and Turcotte, eds., *Handbook of Early Christianity*, p. 455.

Augustus and his successors were commonly called in Latin “*divi filius*” (“Son of a Divine One”) which was translated in Greek as *huios theou* (Son of God). In the Greek New Testament, only one is called by that name- Jesus Christ. In the climax of his gospel, the death of Jesus, Mark tells of, ironically, a *Roman centurion* who is the only one throughout the entire narrative to properly identify Jesus as a *huios theou*, the true Son of God (Mk. 15:39). Mark’s gospel makes the astounding claim that this disgraced Galilean craftsman, rather than imperial Caesar, is the true “Son of God.” The early Jesus followers reading Mark’s gospel would have understood then, that “to proclaim Jesus as Son of God was deliberately denying Caesar his highest title and that to announce Jesus as Lord and Savior was calculated treason.”⁵³ N.T. Wright argues that the Christian proclamation was that there is another King and Lord, and that “this king required allegiance and worship of a sort that radically subverted the allegiance and worship demanded by Caesar.”⁵⁴ This was an “overtly counter-imperial theology” which declared that “Jesus is saviour and lord, and by strong implication, easily audible to residents in a Roman colony, Caesar is not.”⁵⁵

This declaration was a stinging rebuke to the imperial ideology, but the subversive political rhetoric by the early Christians does not stop there. Paul speaks powerfully about the *parousia* or “coming” of Jesus Christ, at which time “every ruler and every authority and power” are defeated and “all his enemies are put under his feet and destroyed” (1 Cor. 15:23-28, Phil 2:5-11). But *parousia* is an imperial term that describes the arrival of an imperial official; Josephus (*The Jewish War*, 5.410) describes the *parousia* of Titus in

⁵³Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, p. 11.

⁵⁴N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 449.

⁵⁵N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of The Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2003), p. 225.

70 C.E. when the prince devastated the Judean countryside and obliterated the holy city of Jerusalem.⁵⁶ Likewise, Paul employs the term *euangelion* (“gospel” or “good news”) to describe the establishment of God’s reign, already underway, though “bad news” for the Romans, was “good news” for everybody else.⁵⁷ *Euangelion* was used throughout the empire to proclaim the birth or accession of a new Caesar and heir to the imperial throne as good news to the subjects of the supposedly benevolent dictators. The point is, Christian theological language is not solely religious rhetoric. At the time it was employed in the New Testament, words like *euangelion*, *parousia*, and even *basileia* (“kingdom” or “reign,” as in “kingdom of God”), were profoundly political and intentionally treasonous.

The cumulative effect of this subversive theopolitical rhetoric was to deny Roman claims to ultimacy. In the eyes of the early Christians, the resurrection of Jesus “marked [him] out as the true ruler of the world, the one of whom Caesar was a mere parody.”⁵⁸ It put the lie to Roman demagoguery and debunked the *imperium* from its claims to transcendence and majesty. The *ekklesia* (church) organized itself as an alternative form of political identity based not upon the power of the sword, but on the kenotic law of love.

By offering a vision and organization for an alternative form of social interaction, the movement challenged the perception that Rome was the desirable, rightful, invincible ruling power. It rejected the empire's totalizing claims and version of social reality that brought benefits to a few and hardships to many. By contextualizing the empire in God's greater purposes, the Christians demystified it, relativized its power, exposed its shortcomings, burst its illusions, revealed its lies, and numbered its days....

⁵⁶Carter, “Vulnerable Power,” in Duhaime, Blasi, and Turcotte, eds., *Handbook of Early Christianity*, p. 473.

⁵⁷*Ibid*, 474.

⁵⁸Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 243.

They exposed the empire's vulnerability by displaying the limits of its claims to human allegiance.⁵⁹

By extolling the one God of Israel and his Son, Jesus the Christ in the face of the Roman pantheon, Christian theology, far from being merely a privatized worldview, contained “a direct attack on the imperial theology and religious propaganda. If there are no such gods, if there is but one divine father and it is not Jupiter/Zeus, Rome's claim to rule at the will of the gods and to present the gods' will, presence, and blessing on the emperor's actions are empty lies.”⁶⁰ Rome’s lies, and the lies of all empires and universalizing ideologies, come under direct assault whenever the church stays faithful to her calling.

Before moving on, a final comparison between the vision of the Roman peace and the peace of Jesus Christ proclaimed by the early Christians is appropriate. We recall from part II how Rome paradoxically established and maintained “peace” through bloodshed and victory as a major component of her social program. Paul however, who opens his letters with “grace and peace” from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, had a very different conception of what this peace was all about. The *shalom* of the Hebrew tradition in which Paul was schooled was a totalizing peace⁶¹ that was free from the threat of coercion that was the backbone of the *Pax Romana*. For Paul, the *charis* (“grace”) of this peace is critical- it is “a free gift that God offers peace to everyone, everywhere.”⁶² The peace of Jesus Christ is brought not by sword, but by cross. The

⁵⁹Carter, “Vulnerable Power,” in Duhaime, Blasi, and Turcotte, eds., *Handbook of Early Christianity*, p. 455.

⁶⁰*Ibid*, 472.

⁶¹For more on what *shalom* represents and encompasses, see Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newtown, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987).

⁶²Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, p. 73.

epistle to the Colossians, whether or not it was authored by Paul, contains some decisively Pauline themes concerning peace. Verse 1:20 notes that the means by which God “reconciled all things to himself,” by “making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” Suffering bloodshed- rather than inflicting bloodshed- is the means of God’s victory and resultant peace. Also, in a startling declaration with unmistakable anti-imperial overtones, Paul writes that Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it [i.e. the cross]” (Colossians 2:15). The cross, the symbol of the bloody *Pax Romana* and the instrument of the humiliation and murder of the Son of God, is simultaneously the means by which Jesus achieved his victory over the imperial powers of darkness which had killed him. The *Pax Romana*, Rome’s false peace, is initiated and governed by violence; the *Pax Christi*, which subverts and overwhelms the imperial lie, is initiated by the vocation of the suffering servant. *This* peace, not the false peace of Rome, is what Paul proclaims as “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

This strategy of deliberate subversion and displacement of the imperial ideology was one major facet of the Christians’ resistance to the death-worshipping power of the empire. Their other strategy was the maintenance of the group identity as the people of God via virtue and moral formation. We turn now to an understanding of how the church formed itself as an alternative political community of discipleship.

Communities of Virtue and Obedience

The early Christians found themselves proclaiming a Lord not only unheard of or rejected by their contemporaries, but explicitly in opposition to much of what their neighbors held sacred. How did they survive? How did they maintain ecclesial

communion and cohesion with one another in the face of an empire which feared and killed them? “By refusing to worship the Roman and territorial gods, Christians were regarded as responsible for every manner of ill. In addition, they were said to be guilty of evil practices, and were charged with being ‘atheists.’”⁶³ In this section, we will examine some strategies of community building and moral formation which helped them maintain lives of fidelity to the reign of God rather than to the reign of Caesar.

We have already seen how the Christians intended their churches to be alternative political communities which resisted the empire’s fundamental orientation toward death. One way in which the churches maintained this identity was through stringent church discipline and a clear understanding of which practices were acceptable for subjects of Jesus and which were not. The *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, is an early Christian discipleship manual dating from the end of the first century or beginning of the second, which viscerally lays out the distinction, saying “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways.”⁶⁴ The “way of life,” as laid out in Chapter 1, consists almost entirely of teachings from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount on nonviolence, unlimited charity, and indiscriminant love. A number of sins are then catalogued in the following chapters as inimical to the way of life. Chapter 2 begins, “And the second commandment of the Teaching; You shall not commit murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not commit pederasty, you shall not commit fornication, you shall not steal, you shall not practice magic, you shall not practice witchcraft, you shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is born.” Already, we can see that the Christian churches set out to be disciplined communities of discipleship, with a

⁶³W.H.C. Frend, “Christianity in the Roman Empire,” in Geoffrey Barraclough, ed., *The Christian World: A Social And Cultural History* (New York: Harry M. Abrams, Inc., 1981), p. 48.

⁶⁴*Didache*, 1. Cited from <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html>

morality sharply differentiated from that of the empire around them; abstention from bloodshed and a rigorous discipline in sexual matters, in contrast to the violent and licentious society which surrounded them, helped cohere the community and demark Christ worshippers from those of the imperial cult.

The *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, composed around 215, which purports to be part of the authoritative teaching handed down from the apostles, offers another glimpse into how that discipline was maintained.⁶⁵ Serving as “a kind of early Church consensus,” it “proves that the Church expressed itself officially on this subject, and that it clearly condemned in the army the homicidal violence which is its fundamental characteristic,”⁶⁶ and is as close to a church-wide statement as we might hope for. Chapter 16 of the *Tradition* makes it clear that it was not only certain activities which were deemed incompatible with the life of Christian discipleship, but certain occupations as well which had to be either modified or abandoned in order to join or remain in good standing in the church. Pimps and prostitutes were required to cease plying their trade, or they would be rejected from the catechumenate. Anyone who was a sculptor by trade was permitted to practice their art, as long as they did not sculpt idols or statues of the Roman deities. Charioteers, gladiators, or anyone else associated with the games in the arena were to cease, or be rejected. After these instructions, we read this striking passage:

A soldier in command must be told not to kill people; if he is ordered so to do, he shall not carry it out. Nor shall he take the oath. If he will not agree, he should be rejected [from the catechumenate]. Anyone who has the power of the sword, or who is a civil magistrate wearing the purple, should desist, or he should be rejected. If a catechumen or a believer

⁶⁵For a good, readable translation of the *Apostolic Tradition* (which was only rediscovered in the 20th century), see here: <http://www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html>

⁶⁶Jean-Michel Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes toward War, Violence, and the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), p. 161.

wishes to become a soldier they should be rejected, for they have despised God.⁶⁷

Right away, we see that while serving in the Roman legions is not absolutely forbidden, killing anyone while discharging the duties of the soldier *was* deemed incompatible with the way of Jesus. Any catechumen or Christian who wanted to be a soldier was cast out of the fellowship, but those soldiers who converted to Christianity were permitted to remain as soldiers as long as they did not kill anyone. Likewise, any who “wear the purple” as imperial magistrates, servants of Caesar, were to resign their posts, or else be rejected from the catechumenate.

The basis of the Christian ethic which demarked and strengthened the community’s identity was a fundamental orientation toward *life*, as contrasted with the empire’s servitude of death we noted in Part II. In addition to the total abstention from the bloodshed of the Roman games (except of course on those occasions when the Christians were thrown to the wild beasts for the entertainment of the crowd), the Christian church rejected abortion and infanticide because of a fundamental opposition to shedding human blood. The early Christian opposition to abortion is widespread and well-documented.⁶⁸ In early Christian arguments against and condemnation of abortion and infanticide, “three important themes emerged during these centuries: the fetus is the creation of God; abortion is murder; and the judgment of God falls upon those guilty of abortion.”⁶⁹ The

⁶⁷*Apostolic Tradition*, 16.9-11. The translation cited here is that of Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *On the Apostolic Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001). Stewart-Sykes is very clear in his footnotes that, because of the context, the “soldier in command” actually refers to soldiers of the inferior rank the privates or common footsoldiers.

⁶⁸In addition to Chapter 2 of the Didache cited above, see also Tertullian’s *Apology*, Chapter 9; Athenagoras’s *Plea For Christians*, 35; Minicius Felix’s *Octavian*, 30.

⁶⁹Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church*, p. 47.

life of the newborn and the infant in the womb was as precious as the life of any adult. Even the unborn fetus “is seen, not as a part of its mother, but as a neighbor. Abortion is rejected as contrary to the other-centered neighbor love,” an attitude which put the Christians strongly at odds with many Roman pagans, among whom it was commonplace.⁷⁰

Likewise, the church cut itself away from the militarism of the empire. Military might, the foundation of the empire’s ideology and hegemonic success, was anathema to official church teaching. We have seen how the *Apostolic Tradition* forbid Christians from joining the army (or from shedding blood if they were already in the army), yet this was far from the only statement on the matter. In his discussion about how the oracle about beating swords into ploughshares and not training for war anymore in Isaiah 2:1-5 had already been fulfilled in the life of the nonviolent church, Justin Martyr writes, “We who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.”⁷¹ Tertullian, ever the moral rigorist, puts it quite bluntly: “Touching this primary aspect of the question, as to the unlawfulness even of a military life itself, I shall not add more, that the secondary question may be restored to its place. Indeed, if, putting my strength to the question, I banish from us the military life.”⁷² The examples could be multiplied many times over, but this would be redundant. While we know that there were some Christians who did serve in the Roman army during the pre-Constantinian period, it was over the objections of the bishops, martyrs, theologians, and

⁷⁰*Ibid*, p. 49.

⁷¹Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 39. Cited from: <http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html>

⁷²Tertullian, *De Corona*, 11. Cited from: <http://earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian04.html>

apologists. Every Christian writer who wrote on the subject of military service between the close of the New Testament era and the ascent of Constantine disapproved of, or even forbade it- not solely because of the idolatry (for the Roman military was heavily involved in the cult of the emperor), but because of a fundamental objection to shedding human blood in whatever cause.⁷³ “The entire body of Christian literature from the first three centuries” affirmed “that Christian discipleship and love demand a complete renunciation of violence and bloodshed.”⁷⁴

The early Christian ethic, which rejected military service, abortion, the games, and all other forms of anti-human violence can best be described as a *consistent* pro-life ethic, encompassing not just abortion, but all other issues impacting on the lives of human beings. In his investigation into abortion in the early church, Michael Gorman provides a brilliant summary of the early Christian attitude that is worth quoting in full here:

The same writers who opposed bloodshed in any other form also condemned abortion... For these people the love which obliterated distinctions between adult and child, guilty and innocent, friend and enemy also demolished the distinction between born and unborn. Christ's life and teachings raised the fetus to the status of neighbor. Abortion manifested violence and injustice to that neighbor and thus became an example of bloodshed, or murder. Those who refused to kill in war refused to kill in the womb, and vice versa.⁷⁵

⁷³On the unanimity of the early tradition in regard to the question of military service, see Jean-Michel Hornus, *It is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes toward War, Violence, and the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); and John Cecil Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War: a Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics* (London: Headley Brothers, 1919).

⁷⁴Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church*, p. 84.

⁷⁵*Ibid*, 89.

One final, eloquent quote from the early church ought to drive home the point of the consistent pro-life ethic. Rhetoretician and apologist Lactantius, writing in the first decade of the fourth century, wrote this stunning passage in his *Divine Institutes*:

For when God forbids us to kill, He not only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but He warns us against the commission of those things which are esteemed lawful among men. Thus it will be neither lawful for a just man to engage in warfare, since his warfare is justice itself, nor to accuse any one of a capital charge, because it makes no difference whether you put a man to death by word, or rather by the sword, since it is the act of putting to death itself which is prohibited. Therefore, with regard to this precept of God, there ought to be no exception at all; but that it is always unlawful to put to death a man, whom God willed to be a sacred animal.⁷⁶

The principled Christian nonviolence we have observed in this section was the norm, not the exception while the Christians lived in the midst of the tragically violent Roman Empire. Their discipline and courageous moral postures served to make them stand out from the pagan society around them. “The Greco-Roman world demonstrated its depreciation of life in its wars, gladiator fights, innumerable crucifixions, exposure of the newborn and abortion of the unborn. Christians interpreted their society's attitude as a choice in favor of bloodshed over love. If society preferred the way of bloodshed, Christians chose the way of love expressed concretely through nonviolence and compassionate justice.”⁷⁷ This uncompromising refusal to kill was a key factor in the maintenance of the church’s fidelity in those early years, and witnessed to their devotion to what is, in the words of Pope John Paul II’s famous encyclical, “the gospel of life.” The gospel of Jesus Christ was life affirming; the gospel of Caesar meant death for the

⁷⁶Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, VI. XX. Cited from: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf07.iii.ii.vi.xx.html>

⁷⁷Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church*, pp. 82-83.

weak. The “two ways” of the *Didache* could not be more sharply differentiated. As we turn to address the question of fidelity to the gospel in the midst of our own imperial context, we must bear the witness of the early church in mind, for their lives and times were strikingly similar to our own.

IV. Modern Christian Responses to Empire

Our journey thus far has taken us to the debauched and bloodstained halls of power in ancient Rome and the reactions of the earliest Christians to the imperial ideology and ethos. Now, we must bring the wisdom of the ancients to bear on the challenges that face us as Christians, struggling to live faithfully in the midst of a seductive imperial culture of our own. Like Rome, America employs a totalizing ideology demanding obedience, and allegiance.⁷⁸ And like Rome, America and the powers and principalities behind it have a fundamental orientation toward death as a moral purpose, even if it is denied or suppressed. The Christian task in such a context, as it was during Roman times, is two-fold: (1.) to see clearly and soberly through the imperial claims and ideology, by remembering which master we *really* serve, and (2.) to maintain a faithful witness to the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ by healing and restoring that which the empire has crushed and destroyed, acts of both resistance to the imperial powers and of solidarity with those the empire has turned into victims.

The Christian who, in Karl Barth’s old adage, analyzes the world with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other will be alert to the false claims to power and

prestige made by the nations of the world, not to mention the corporations, unions, and

⁷⁸“Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict, there is no neutral ground.” (George W. Bush, Presidential address to the nation, October 7, 2001). In the rhetoric of the war on terror in particular, you are either with us or against us. Empires seem to take such a black and white view of the world for granted. You are either a “friend of Caesar” (John or you are rubbish, and as good as dead.

other political bodies. Such claims of power are baldly on display in the rhetoric of the modern American empire. In 1997, a number of influential Washington powerbrokers assembled to launch what they called the “Project for a New American Century” (PNAC). Among its founding members and signatories were a number of powerful advisors and officials in the Bush administration.⁷⁹ According to their website, PNAC is a “non-profit educational organization dedicated to a few fundamental propositions: that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle; and that too few political leaders today are making the case for global leadership.”⁸⁰ Notice here the stress on American domination in the globe, based first and foremost on military strength. Sound familiar? The PNAC’s agenda has largely become the goals of the current president’s administration, and has radically shaped their policy decisions. The imperial mindset is also manifested in how the group views American power as a benevolent dictatorship as the Romans did- good for America and for the world.

For anyone, this ideology is seductive. The will to power is a compelling force, drawing people to assert their own dominance, because they are convinced their rule is good for everyone. As Christians however, we are obliged to follow Christ who came to serve rather than to be served. We must recall that, as we observed in Part II, “America, like all its predecessors as nations and all other principalities, is ruled by the power of death, and that this truth is as discernable here and now as it was in Ancient Rome.”⁸¹ As a result, the person of biblical conscience will be always wary of claims the empire

⁷⁹These included now Vice-President Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, and the current President’s brother, Jeb Bush.

⁸⁰<http://www.newamericancentury.org>

⁸¹Stingfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*, p. 113.

makes for allegiance, obedience, and service “often under the rubric called patriotism.”⁸² Christians possess the prophetic gift to look past the imperial rhetoric of goodness and holiness and see it for what it is: “a grotesque parody of Jesus Christ and of his Church in the vocation of the holy nation.”⁸³

Christians must perpetually live then, as the early church did, in a posture of fundamental resistance to empire. This is not rebellion as such, for we are forbidden by our Scriptures (for starters, Romans 13:2; Matthew 5:39, 26:52) and our tradition from taking up arms in order to merely replace one imperial regime with another. It is however, a posture which defies the empire by refusing to bow to its delusions of ultimacy and actively resists the empire’s death-dealing by living and promoting the life-giving good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ who conquered death and sin. Our ultimate, eschatological victory over these powers is assured, even if our temporal fortunes are uncertain.

One essential action that the church must take in its resistance against the death-serving empire is a refusal to comply with those aspects of imperial existence which promote death rather than life. We return now to Martin Luther King’s speech at Riverside Church in which he came out so forcefully against the Vietnam War. “As we counsel young men concerning military service,” he said, “we must clarify for them our nation's role in Vietnam and challenge them with the alternative of conscientious objection.... I recommend it to all who find the American course in Vietnam a dishonorable and unjust one. Moreover, I would encourage all ministers of draft age to

⁸²*Ibid.*

⁸³*Ibid*, p. 114.

give up their ministerial exemptions and seek status as conscientious objectors.”⁸⁴ By steering our young men and women away from the American military-industrial complex, we not only stand in solidarity with those early Christians who did precisely this in ancient Rome, but we actively subvert the power of the militarism which has so gripped this country. We witness that spreading death and destruction in the name of establishing the *Pax Americana* is *not* consistent with the gospel of life that is the Way of Jesus. Likewise, we must actively oppose abortion, not by angry protests and shrill condemnatory placards, but with the compassion of Jesus who adopted a people who were not a people to be his own. Young pregnant mothers and families who feel unable to care for their children must not be left scared and alone, but must be embraced with the loving arms of the Body of Christ, supported in every way necessary to give every child, both born and unborn, a chance at life.

As we draw our exploration into the Christian response to the horizons of empire to a close, we must sound a warning. Complicity with the empire, and abandonment of our primary allegiance to Christ and his church are the road to disaster. The early church discovered this in the fourth century. The conversion of Constantine ushered in a new era when the church was no longer killed and persecuted by the halls of imperial power, but welcomed and coddled by the same powers that had once hunted it down. As the church grew to be more and more conflated with the empire, the decisive moral stances we witnessed earlier began to erode. For example, in the space of only a century, the early Christians went from being forbidden by their church leaders from joining the Roman

⁸⁴King, “A Time to Break Silence,” in Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, pp. 239-240.

army, to the 416 edict by Emperor Theodosius II, declaring that from thenceforth, *only* Christians could serve in the Roman army.⁸⁵

Today, we face a similar crisis. The church of today represents the church of the fourth and fifth centuries more than it does the church of the first three centuries, in that the church is relatively cozy in the American halls of power. To maintain fidelity to our Lord, we must stop ransoming our souls to imperial power and return to Him who ransomed himself so that we might live. By denying and subverting the empire's claims to ultimacy, and rejecting the orientation toward death of the world through a *consistently* pro-life ethic, we might redeem the American church as once more the faithful people of God. The road ahead is fraught with peril, but

“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:57-58)

⁸⁵Hornus, *It is Not Lawful For Me to Fight*, p. 183.

Bibliography