

The Holy Roman Empire

Conquering the world in Christ's name

A list of wars from the 6th century BCE until today can be found on Wikipedia. The list includes 250 wars with death tolls of 25,000 or more, plus 186 wars from 1500 BCE until now with fewer than 25,000 total deaths. If you're like me, you've probably never heard of most of these wars, or the warlords and empires that fought them. Yet some of these wars resulted in the deaths of millions of people. Altogether, the death toll of all known wars piles up to a billion or more throughout the annals of recorded history, the sad story of humanity pathologically at war with itself!

In this chapter I drill down to highlight the Holy Roman Empire, one of the largest warring empires since the birth of Christ. It may seem like a plate of historical spaghetti at first, but I've kept it brief and included some lesser known facts. My point is to identify how Christianity came to be shaped by historical forces in support of political objectives rather than the goal of empowering people spiritually to be transformed by renewing of their hearts and minds.

First, the Roman Republic

Before there was a Roman Empire, there was the Roman *Republic*, founded in 509 BC. The Republic lasted nearly 500 years and was constantly warring to maintain and expand itself. The transition to what became the Roman *Empire* began around the time of Christ but had nothing to do with Jesus. Rather, it had to do with a civil war between one general, Julius Caesar, fighting another general, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, widely known simply as Pompey.

Caesar defeated Pompey in 48 BC and soon moved to reduce the Roman Senate's monopoly over state power. In 44 BC he had the Senate name him *Dictator Perpetuo*, "perpetual dictator," where dictator means "speaks solemnly and often." This threatened the Senate's long-standing principle of shared rule. Certain senators conspired against Caesar and succeeded in murdering him halfway through the month (the "Ides") of March in 44 BC. The dying Caesar famously exclaimed "*Et tu Brute?*" ("And you Brutus?"), as illuminated in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Julius Caesar*. Brutus, a former supporter, became Caesar's most famous betrayer.

Julius Caesar's popularity among Roman lower classes led to a backlash against the conspirators that played out several years until Caesar's adopted son and only legal heir, Gaius Octavian, defeated Caesar's betrayers at the Battle of Phillipi in Greece. (See text box next page.) The shrewd Octavian quickly conferred deity status on his deceased father which helped anchor his own claim to power. He then took the name Caesar *Augustus*, the latter meaning "majestic," "venerable," and "increase." His supporters began addressing him as the son of god (i.e., of Julius Caesar), majestic king of kings, and even savior of the world, terms that would figure centrally in the story of Jesus, who was born in the Roman Empire during the reign of Caesar Augustus. These terms as applied to Jesus helped make his life and teachings more understandable to Roman culture, but also produced a haze of symbolic language which would confuse many people attempting to better understand Christianity, especially in modern times.

Caesar Augustus and Jesus the Messiah

Jesus was born during the reign of Julius Caesar Augustus, which led to an archetypal confrontation that still reverberates today. Both leaders inaugurated something new, radical and powerful.

Caesar Augustus became a human “god” and exercised absolute dictatorial power. Rome morphed into an expansionist empire sustained by a feared army. Under Caesar (which became a title instead of a personal name) Rome would enjoy internal peace (*Pax Romana*), while surrounding nations were subjected to ruthless Roman aggression and domination. One day other nations would imitate Rome’s brutal example, titling their war mongering dictators “emperors” (from Latin *imperatorem*: “commander”) or calling them Kaiser, Tsar or Czar, all terms derived from “Caesar.”

Jesus introduced a radically different governing principle based on freeing people from bondage and uniting them willingly under the “law of the Spirit of life” (Romans 8:2), sometimes referred to the “natural law” of God. The Bible says “**It is for freedom Christ has set you free**” (Galatians 5:1). This kind of freedom is the opposite of lawless freedom. It’s a mature form of personal freedom with moral accountability under the natural law of God.

A pivotal moment contrasting Caesar’s rule with Christ’s Way occurred when Jesus once took his disciples to Caesarea Phillipi in northern Israel, a place named in memory of the battle in Greece where Octavian got his revenge on his father Julius Caesar’s betrayers. In Caesarea Phillipi the largest tributary of the Jordan River bubbles up like living waters from artesian springs. A Roman temple had been built there in honor of Caesar Augustus, near a large cave known as the Gates of *Hades* (aka Hell). Human sacrifices are said to have once been offered there to Pan, the half-man, half-animal Greek god of untamed nature—a fitting metaphor for violent Roman rule.

At Caesarea Phillipi, Jesus’ disciple Peter declared that Jesus was the “Christ, the son of the living God.” Jesus replied that He would build His church on this divine revelation. It’s the first use of the Greek word for church (*ekklésia*) in the Bible, where Christ’s “government” on earth was revealed. Jesus said his realm is not of this world. It was never intended to be a political realm (nor “Christian nationalism”).

One proof of Christ’s enduring power is that the fearsome Roman Empire is long gone while Christ’s followers number over 2 billion people today, and growing. Even so, Roman emperors would coopt Christianity and turn it into a national religion under the suzerainty of Caesar’s successors.

In 27 BC, Octavian was officially named the first Emperor of the new Roman Empire, thereby fully replacing the ancient Roman Republic. The new Roman Empire would rule and conquer by sheer force and use of fear combined with well-honed Roman administrative skills. Eventually, the new Roman Empire too would undergo a civil war with generals vying for power that would in turn precipitate the *Holy* Roman Empire, under Constantine the Great.

Emperor Constantine’s Gambit

The ascendance of Constantine the Great as Roman emperor (306–337 CE) set in motion changes that have affected the world for millennia. His gambit was to make peace with multiple religions until one stood out above the rest. For Constantine, “*Sol Invictus*,” the Unconquerable Sun, was the primary god of Rome. The emperor minted coins in the Sun god’s honor and established Sun

Day as the first day of a sun-metered week. In 312 AD (“*Anno Domini*,” the “Year of Our Lord”), Constantine is reputed to have had a vision of the cross of Christ before conquering his main rival, Maxentius. He went on to elevate Christianity to preeminence above other religions. Some historians believe Constantine was genuinely converted and baptized right before he died in 337.

A Different Kind of Christianity

The Christianity advanced by Constantine was not the one modeled by Jesus Christ, as noted in the preceding text box. Furthermore, Constantine worked to remove all traces of Christianity’s Jewish roots, changed the biblical Sabbath from Saturday to Sun Day and removed other Jewish holidays from his calendar. He advanced councils that defined church doctrines and heresies, and inserted his imperial self to resolve theological disputes. Churches were given property and floor plans that elevated priests up front who spoke only in Latin to people seated in rows reflecting Rome’s administrative predilections. Imperialized church doctrine reigned supreme—a not altogether bad thing given the great variety of theological opinions and heresies that battled for primacy in the early days of the church after the departure of Jesus.

As a result of Constantine’s reforms, the charismatic role of the Holy Spirit that drove the rapid growth of the early church by word of mouth disappeared nearly altogether as the church participated in the imperial alliance of successive Roman Emperors and Popes.¹ Faith morphed from a matter of personal spiritual experience confirmed through voluntary adult baptism, into a matter of doctrinal declarations taught to young children baptized as infants.

Rome became the first great empire to rise against other nations in the name of Christ. Church growth would henceforth be dominated by doctrinal alignment, first with the Church of Rome, later enlarged to include the Eastern Church when Constantine conquered Byzantium and made Constantinople his new capital in 330 AD. Over time, these alignments became increasingly politicized and spiritually corrupted through intermingling the power and wealth of the state with the ecclesiastical authority of the church. Moreover, doctrinal alignment became the primary calling card of the church, often outweighing the love and truths demonstrated by Jesus’ teachings and life.

As if anticipating these developments, Jesus had told His disciples shortly before his crucifixion: **“My kingdom is not of this world.”** He knew what lay ahead. He added: **“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.... And Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles [non-Jews], until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”**²

The Christian “Just War” Theory Emerges

Less than seventy-five years after Constantine’s death, Rome fell in 410 AD, following a 3-day siege by the Visigoths, a fierce pagan Germanic tribe. The defeat shook the Empire to its core. By 476 AD, the western Roman Empire fell completely, leaving the eastern half ruled from Constantinople. The Eastern Empire, aka Byzantium, would survive nearly another thousand years despite setbacks from competing empires.

¹ This story is documented in *The Nearly Perfect Crime: How the Church Almost Killed the Ministry of Healing*, by Dr. Francis MacNutt. After Constantine, miracles in the West manifested primarily in the lives of a few revered church saints.

² See Luke 21:10,24; also Romans 11:25, Revelations 11:2 and 19:17-19.

The sack of Rome led ultimately to formulation of the Christian “just war” theory by Bishop Augustine of Hippo (a port city in modern Algeria near Tunisia). A Roman official wrote Augustine, insisting that the destruction of Rome proved Christ’s teachings were incompatible with the realities of governing an empire.

Augustine wrote that Jesus had once told some Roman soldiers: “Do not take money by force or false accusation. Be content with your wages” (Luke 3:14). From this Augustine concluded: “If he commanded them to be content with their pay, **he did not forbid soldiering.**” However, when soldiers came to capture Jesus before His crucifixion, and Peter drew his sword to defend Him, Jesus forewarned, “**all who live by the sword will die by the sword**” (Luke 22:51). In sanctioning soldiering, Christ did not mean he viewed violence as redemptive.

The trail of human blood certainly did not stop with Jesus’ Crucifixion. It followed Christianized empires wherever their swords led. Nonetheless, Augustine went on to assert it was “just” for Christians to wage war to stop violent aggression against Christians. It was also “just” to expand Christian territory by taking land from ungodly tyrants who sought to prevent the peaceful spread of Christianity. Augustine asked what good is an empire if its people are constantly engaged in “the disasters of war and the spilling of blood?” He wrote:

The real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like; and it is generally to punish these things when force is required... when...right conduct requires [good men] to act....”³

In his masterwork, *The City of God*, Augustine asserted war is “limited by its purpose, its authority and its conduct.” He epitomized it as a battle between two cities, the Earthly City and the City of God:

Two loves have made the two cities. Love of self, even to the point of contempt for God, made the earthly city; and love of God, even to the point of contempt for self, made the heavenly city [City of God].”⁴

These principles later undergirded efforts to repel barbarians in Europe and turn back Muslim fighters who waged aggressive campaigns against nearly the entire expanse of early classical Christian civilization. Truth be told, abuse of the Just War theory also opened the door to aggressive warfare conducted in the name of Christ and stretched to the breaking point Jesus’ teaching to turn the other cheek.

Thomas Aquinas would later refine Augustine’s views in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* (written 1265-1273). He concluded just wars could not be fought by individuals, only by sovereigns with legitimate authorization to call for war. He further concluded a just cause was needed to justify an attack or against an aggressor. He stated Christian belligerents should purpose to advance good and avoid evil. These principles would be tested for centuries to come, especially as the Muslim Empire advanced.

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³ Augustine of Hippo, “Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon.” XXII. 74. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, p. 301.

⁴ Dr. Mark D. Allen, <https://www.liberty.edu/ace/articles/city-god-city-man/>. Allen says Augustine sometimes equated the “City of God” with the Roman Church, but didn’t consider all church members “true citizens.”