

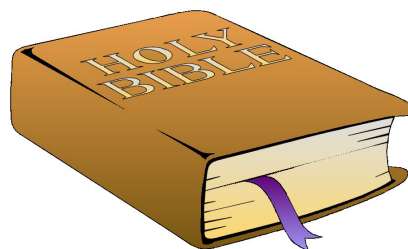
Has Christianity caused wars?



- ♦ It is perfectly true that conflicts between different factions of Christianity have caused much trouble, war and suffering
- ♦ You may think Christianity reflects what the Bible says, and that therefore the Bible is to be blamed for all this suffering
- ♦ You may be surprised to learn that the driving force behind the church gradually changed from Bible teaching to political expediency.

We will show you how in the first few centuries of Christianity:

- 1. Politicians replaced the Bible as the authority in the church**
- 2. Belief and practice were guided by politicians and not by the Bible**



We will also see that the suffering caused by Christianity is a result of politics and not the Bible message.

To be certain that we have unbiased information, we shall use several independent sources of information to see how Christianity developed. These are:

The Times Atlas of World History

World History, subtitled "An overview of political, religious and cultural trends", published by Geddes & Grosset,

Chronicle of the World, published by Longman

The Medieval Church – a brief history, by Joseph H Lynch, published by Longman

Encyclopaedia Britannica Online

The teaching of Jesus on conflict

Before we consider the trouble that Christianity has caused, it may be useful to remind ourselves what Jesus Christ said about dealing with problems. The following are a few verses that reflect his teaching and that of his early followers:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.
Matthew 5 v 38 and 39

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.
Matthew 5 v 43 and 44

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath.
Romans 12 v 17 to 19

See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.
1 Thessalonians 5 v 15

Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing.
1 Peter 3 v 8 and 9

The principle cannot be missed! Christians should show love to all people. They should live peaceably and not resist aggressors. Human nature being what it is, they do not always manage to live up to this principle. But that should not stop them trying.

As we look at how the church has developed, we should bear in mind that this principle was taught by the founders of Christianity.

- Jesus Christ said that his followers should:
 - ♦ show love to all
 - ♦ live as peacefully as is possible
 - ♦ not resist aggressors

Political influences on Christianity



The arch of Constantine in Rome

The book *World History* mentions the political influences on early Christianity. It tells us about the Roman Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire around AD 324:

... Constantine accepted the new Faith. Emperor worship may now have ceased, but even a Christian emperor could not shed the concept that he was the fountain of religion. He declared himself to be the thirteenth apostle and sat as chairman of the Council of Nicea, which established Christian doctrine. This set a precedent for the control of the church by the state.

Talking of the church as it developed at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, the book tells us:

The emperor maintained Constantine's position at the head of the church. Patriarchs, bishops and priests lay under his power. Emperors decided doctrine and mercilessly persecuted many of their subjects who held 'heretical' beliefs.

The book *The Medieval Church – a brief history* tells us that the church has been involved in politics from the fourth century. It makes two interesting statements:

Between the fourth and sixth centuries, Christianity adapted to being a state church. The transition was not always smooth and there were tensions between the claims of the church and of the state that were never fully resolved. In spite of that, the church entered into a close and lasting alliance with the Roman state.

Since the fourth century Roman Empire, the church had been in alliance with rulers, a situation that was reinforced by the important role that some early medieval rulers had played in the conversion of their people.

The same book also shows how deeply the church became involved in politics:

... the Church was the central institution of the European Middle Ages ... it was a key actor in the high politics of kings and emperors; it ordered the relations of man and woman, the individual and the group, the ruler and the ruled.

- The Emperor Constantine became a powerful influence in the church
- The state began to control the church
- Emperors influenced what the church believed
- They persecuted those who disagreed with them
- The church became heavily involved in politics

Church beliefs guided by politicians

The Times Atlas of World History makes it clear that politics influenced church belief in the first few centuries of Christianity:

Meanwhile important decisions, particularly the definition of doctrine, were made by the assembled clergy.

Theoretically these councils represented the voice of the Church, but in practice Christianity as the state religion was often subject to imperial constraint.

The *Chronicle of the World*, which portrays world history as newspaper reports, also confirms that politicians had a great influence on beliefs of the church:

Nicea, Asia Minor, 20 May 325

The Emperor Constantine, dressed in purple robes to stress the sacred nature of his power, today inaugurated the Ecumenical Council of Nicea.

What began as an academic theological debate has spread to Christian congregations throughout the empire and there is a real danger of a lasting schism.

Constantine is using his skills as a peacemaker in the spiritual sphere; his advisors have devised a compromise solution which looks likely to carry the Council.

It is clear that Constantine's main objective was to obtain an agreement to further his political aim of having a unified empire. Finding the truth of the matter does not seem to have been important.

The situation had not changed 65 years later, when the *Chronicle of the World* has the following report about the Roman Emperor Theodosius:

Roman Empire, 25 December 390

... one of his first actions after he had established himself in power was to call an Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381 to unite the Church

The *Chronicle of the World* reveals the real motives and character of Theodosius in the following report:

Italy, 391

Theodosius, born in Spain, the son of an army general, has needed all his military skills to defeat his rivals for the imperial purple and hold the splitting empire together.

After killing usurpers and puppets, as he calls them, he has reunited the empires of east and west.

Again it is clear that political motives were more important than what the Bible says.

The book *The Medieval Church – a brief history* also shows how the political desire for a united Church was more important than Bible teaching:

Christianity is very prone to split over disputes concerning belief, organisation and discipline. Constantine and his successors discovered that religious unity was difficult to achieve. They were repeatedly drawn by personal conviction and by political necessity to try to preserve the unity of Catholic Christianity, especially when serious disputes broke out in the fourth and fifth centuries concerning the nature of Christ and the nature of the Trinity.

This quotation shows that “personal conviction” and “political necessity” were more important than Bible teaching.

An interesting article appears on the Online *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. The article is not easy to understand on first reading, so we have summarised below the message of one of the paragraphs:

- Christianity changed from a small group on the fringe of society into an institution that wanted to be accepted by everyone
- As this change occurred, the belief that Jesus Christ was to return and set up a worldwide kingdom embarrassed church leaders
- Almost every Christian writer in the first century believed in the second coming of Jesus Christ
- When Christianity became the state religion the belief in the literal second coming of Jesus Christ was “pushed to the very margins of acceptable Christian thought”

(The paragraph is reproduced in the appendix so that you may check our summary.)

This indicates that the belief in the second coming of Jesus which is mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible was removed from mainstream belief because the church wanted to be an acceptable institution in society.

This is yet one more occasion where Bible teaching has been ignored because of political considerations.

- Politics influenced church beliefs in the early centuries of Christianity
- Political aims were more important than Bible truth

The church as a political force

The Times Atlas of World History makes it clear that the church soon became a political force. Speaking of the sixth century it says:

... when Rome succumbed to barbarian attack, the Church and its bishops, with their vast estates and pervasive influence ... guided Europe, as well as Christendom, into the new age.

Pope Gregory VII in 1075 showed the political aims of the popes. *Chronicle of the World* gives the following imaginary newspaper report:

Rome, April 1075

Pope Gregory VII is making a strong bid to establish the primacy of the papacy and its authority over kings and princes as well as archbishops. Dictatus Papae (Sayings of the Pope) contains 27 short and pithy sentences which leave no doubt at all where the ultimate authority lies.

The assertions include "That he [the pope] alone may use the imperial insignia": "That he may depose emperors, that he himself may be judged by no one" ... Gregory sees the papacy primarily as a governmental institution which must be backed by laws.

It is clear from these quotations that the church became a very powerful political force, exerting its influence at the highest political levels. The result of this was that the church became involved in political disputes, which often led to conflict and war. The principle of non-aggression that we considered at the start was not very much in evidence.

© iStockphoto.com / Bill Grove



Vatican City – home of the Popes

A quotation from *World History* shows how the church exercised its political influence in promoting war:

The Pope declared that Christian kings had a right to conquer heathen lands. Some Catholic friars and, later, Jesuits did identify with the cause of the native people, but even their mission stations were instruments of colonial control.

© iStockphoto.com / Paul Cowan



Statue of the English king Richard the Lionheart who was involved in the Crusades

The Crusades, which began in 1095, are a good example of the Church becoming involved in war. The book *World History* tells us:

In 1095 the Byzantine emperor appealed to the pope for assistance against the Turks. The pope answered the call by preaching a Holy War.

The result was much bloodshed and suffering spread over many years.

World History also tells us that the Popes were little different from politicians. Speaking of the fifteenth century we are told:

... the pope ruled the Papal States as any other temporal monarch, and involved himself in the politics of the peninsula... During this period the lifestyle of the popes was little different from that of any other monarch. They led troops into battle, promoted family interests, including those of their children, and built themselves enormous monuments.

When the Protestant churches appeared in the sixteenth century, they became equally involved in politics and conflict. The *Chronicle of the World* has the following "report":

Germany, 1614

All Europe is holding its breath as the German princes – Catholics and Protestants alike – prepare for a war which threatens to engulf the whole continent.

The war actually began in 1618, and resulted in 30 years of fighting between Catholics and Protestants.

The decisions that caused the conflicts were political, even though they were made by the church. The principles of showing love to all, and of non-aggression, that we considered earlier were obviously ignored.

- The church became a political power
- Popes behaved like politicians and called for wars
- Protestants and Catholics fought
- The principles of love and non-aggression were ignored

The translation of the Bible

During the sixteenth century, the Bible was translated into English. This was when King James I authorised a group of scholars make a reliable English translation, which has since been called the Authorised or King James Version.



Translation of the Bible at the time was not approved by the Roman Church, however.



They did not want the Bible to be readily available to ordinary men and women.

The common Bible was in Latin, and only educated men and priests could understand it.

Tyndale was a scholar who began to translate the Bible into English. However, he was persecuted and hunted down and killed before he could finish it. He was burnt at the stake for being a heretic because he wanted the Bible to be translated and distributed so that everybody could read and understand it.

Once again trouble was being caused by state-controlled Christianity that had no real interest in the Bible message.

- Tyndale was killed because he wanted everyone to read the Bible for themselves
- The established church was more interested in keeping its political power

Summary:

- ⇒ **Politics has been a big influence in the development of Christianity**
- ⇒ **Political motives were more important than Bible truth**
- ⇒ **The principle of non-aggression taught by Jesus Christ was ignored**
- ⇒ **The suffering caused by Christianity cannot be blamed on the Bible**

Appendix

Extract from *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, page reference
<<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-235307>>.

As Christianity evolved from a charismatic cult on the fringes of society into an institution eager to live in harmony with that society, the hopes of apocalyptic millenarianism embarrassed church leaders, who emphasized that Jesus' kingdom was "not of this world." Whereas almost every prominent Christian writer of the 1st century posited a literal millennialism, by late in the 2nd century ecclesiastical writers had begun an assault on millenarian texts (especially the Revelation to John, the only New Testament text to explicitly address an earthly kingdom). Origen, an early 3rd-century theologian, argued that the millennium should be interpreted allegorically; others attempted to eliminate Revelation from the canon altogether (the Eastern church succeeded). When Christianity became the official state religion, millenarianism was pushed to the very margins of acceptable Christian thought.