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**THE DAWN OF CHRISTIANITY**  
The Fourth and Early Fifth Centuries  
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**THEOLOGIAN AND CHRISTIAN STATESMEN OF THE 4TH CENTURY**

- **Athanasius of Alexandria:** (293- bishop: 328-73) He fought for Trinitarian theology. By the power of his writing concerning the **Incarnation**, he won the Church back for Orthodoxy. He was forced to flee his bishopric of Alexandria several times because of Imperial alignment with Arianism. He was called the **black dwarf**, because he was Coptic, that is, native Egyptian, swarthy in color, and very short. He wrote some of the greatest words concerning the incarnation ever written. It is he who wrote the biography of Antony the Great which did so much to send aspiring young men and women to seek holiness as hermits and monks in the deserts of Egypt and Syria.
- **Hilary of Poitiers in Gaul (295-368):** Argued eloquently for the full deity of Jesus.

**The Cappadocian Fathers: These three were theologians of the Trinity.**

- **Gregory of Nazianzus** (c. 329– 390) Bishop of Constantinople, called the Theologian of the Trinity, and an accomplished speaker and writer.
- **Basil (the Great) of Caesarea: (330-379)** the Father of Eastern Communal monasticism, and an untiring advocate of Trinitarian theology.
- **Gregory of Nyssa (335-395):** the brother of Basil, he wrote extensively on the Trinity and why three members of the Trinity could be one God rather than three gods.

**I. KEY FIGURES OF THE LATE FOURTH AND EARLY FIFTH CENTURIES**

The late 4<sup>th</sup> Century and early 5<sup>th</sup> Century was a period full of fascinating individuals. It is appropriate that we finish the quarter today talking about a few of them, as several of them made such a profound impact upon the Church that their influence was destined to last to the present day. And of course, the Middle Ages were the first to receive the magnitude of their imprint. We'll begin our study of the Middle Ages next quarter, beginning February 5. Who were they? We've already mentioned **Athanasius (293- 373; bishop: 328-73)** briefly last week—the Black Dwarf of Alexandria, whose writing and influence more than any other were to keep the Church on an Orthodox track. His work on the Incarnation is still being read today. And it was his biography of Antony, as we have seen, that started a mass movement of young men and women to the desert as spiritual heavyweights doing battle for Christ. But there were others too. I'd like to spend the hour on a few of them today: **Jerome; Ambrose; John Chrysostom and Martin of Tours**. All of these, in their own way, influenced the course of events in the world that would follow them. We'll have to leave off the greatest of all, Augustine, till next quarter.

**II. JEROME**

Of all the theologians and preachers of his day, Jerome was undoubtedly the least like able and

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most bizarre. Jerome had by all counts a nasty temperament. He castigated fellow Christian leaders who disagreed with him; he quarreled at one time or another with nearly all his friends; he seldom washed; and was probably ill smelling. Despite this he was, in Paul Johnson's words: "a wonderfully vivid and outspoken controversialist" (*A History of Christianity*, page 110), was a superb scholar and produced the most influential Bible translation of all time. **He was born in 348 and died in 420.**

Aside from his genetic make-up, it is probable that much of his crotchiness stemmed from what we today would interpret as a misunderstanding of Grace. Jerome struggled mightily with two personal weaknesses. The first was his love of classical literature—he loved the Roman writer Cicero a first century B.C. Roman philosopher and statesman who is widely considered one of Rome's greatest orators and prose stylists. Jerome felt so guilty about his love for Cicero, that he once dreamed that he came before the Judge at the end of time and when asked what he was, when he replied that he was a Christian, heard in reply: "You lie! You are a Ciceronian." Unlike the Greek Alexandrian theologians Origen or Justin Martyr before him in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, who loved classical literature and believed that all truth leads in the end to Christ, Jerome felt that the Church was being corrupted by the pagan influences of the Roman Imperial court and its rich privileges, and swore at one point to study Scripture and Scripture alone. But he could never quite give up his love of classical writing and copied Cicero's Latin style. This of course, in God's good providence, was a happy thing for his translation of the Bible.

His second struggle was with lustful thoughts. Jerome refused the idea of marriage, writing that "marriage is only one degree less sinful than fornication" (Johnson, page 110). In this he was worlds away from Jesus' and Paul's teaching on the subject; but mirrored a growing tendency in the Church of seeing sexual desire itself in a bad light. He thought that perhaps if he concentrated on studies, the problem would go away. So he gave himself to intense erudition. He thought he'd try the Hebrew language which seemed to him a barbaric one, but one which God had used nevertheless for inspiring the Old Testament, so, he gave God a chance on this one and plunged himself into the study of Hebrew. He became the personal secretary of Bishop Damascus of Rome who suggested to him what would become his life work, the translation of the Scriptures into Latin. He was supported in his work by a ring of 5 female disciples some of whom became students of Greek and Hebrew as well. When Damascus died, Jerome and a wealthy lady friend named Paula and her daughter left Rome for Palestine where Paula founded a female monastery and Jerome one for men. Their habits were not severe asceticism but rather a life based on scholarship and study. He corresponded widely, investigated thoroughly, and soon became an expert in textual criticism, that is, the determination of which texts in Greek and Hebrew were most reliable through comparison with other ancient texts and manuscripts that Jerome would dig up from far and near. This allowed him to base his work of translation on earlier and better texts than the faulty Latin translations which were already circulating and were based on the Septuagint—an early translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek finished in 132 B.C.

What Jerome and his collaborators produced in the end was a superlative Latin translation which became the foundational Scriptures of the Western Church throughout the Middle Ages and well into the modern era. It is called, of course, the **Vulgate**. Interestingly, at the

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beginning, he had trouble getting it accepted. People already studied the scriptures in other Latin translations, they had their favorite texts, and it bothered them that Jerome should think his sources better than the Greek Septuagint, the Greek text of the Old Testament upon which the translations into Latin they read were based. Augustine, a contemporary, himself was upset, but Jerome's tenacious and contrary nature won out in the end, and so did the Church since what he bequeathed was a vast improvement and blessing, until such time as scholars came who learned the same science of textual criticism that Jerome used, and did for our modern age what Jerome had done for his.

But the struggle with sexual desire never left him. One of the most frequently quoted passages of the patristic age during the Medieval Period was this confession of Jerome's: "*I often imagined myself among beehives of girls: my face was pale with hunger, my lips chilled, but my mind burned with desire, the fires of lust leapt up before me though my flesh was almost dead*" (Johnson, p. 110). Two aristocratic women who had followed him from Rome to serve him in his scholarly work—Paula and her daughter—dressed in rags and rarely washed or combed their hair. All of this, of course, made him a profoundly miserable and agonized man "whose enforced continence was bought at the cost of human charity" (p. 110). And it is a lesson for us today. A struggle which Martin Luther some 1100 years later ended with a dawning realization of the truth of the scriptures that we are justified by faith; and that struggling against desires that God Himself has created within us, is to struggle against nature. And so, Luther bade his fellow monks and nuns to marry. But we are 1100 years from that day with Jerome. It is a consolation that such Roman theologians of the day as **Jovinian** profoundly disagreed with Jerome—maintaining that women who were married were on an equal standing before God as virgins, and that marriage was a good gift of God. It is an even greater consolation that the scriptures that Jerome translated do not lie and are always capable of bringing balance and truth back to our lives.

### III. AMBROSE

The next Christian leader I'd like to take a look at is Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. Ambrose is interesting for three reasons. The first has to do with the manner in which he was elected bishop; the second, his willingness to face down power, and the third his role in the conversion of the greatest Christian of the age, Augustine of Hippo.

Ambrose at the time of his accession to the post of **Bishop of Milan**, a city north of Rome, was governor of that city. This was a time when the Arian/Nicene controversy was still in full tilt. When the bishop of Milan, an Arian, died there was high tension in the city as some wanted another Arian, and some wanted someone who supported the Nicene Creed. Only eight years later bishops would gather for the Council of Constantinople and reaffirm the Nicene Creed and elaborate on it, but at this time, it was still unclear how things would go and Milan was an important bishopric. **It was the year 373** and an election was occurring for the post of bishop or principle pastor of the church in that city. Ambrose decided to attend in order to keep things from turning into a riot. As governor he was known for his fair and efficient rule and was very popular as well as being a skilled orator. When he sensed things were getting tense he stood up in front of the assembly and spoke with such assurance and reason that calm was restored. Suddenly a child cried out: "**Ambrose! Bishop!**" And soon the whole crowd was crying out: "Ambrose, Bishop! Ambrose, Bishop!" Ambrose, who had no desire for the post, made

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himself scarce and tried to flee the city; but when the Western Emperor heard that he had been voted in by acclamation, he agreed that this was a lovely idea and made it known to Ambrose that he would be very displeased if he persisted in his attempts to avoid these duties. So Ambrose accepted. He was only a catechumen at the time, not even baptized, so the rite was duly performed and he was hurried through the various ranks of the church in eight days, ordained, and undertook the study of theology. This he soon mastered, becoming one of the greatest theologians of the day. His speaking apparently was spell binding. One of Ambrose's preaching themes was how true strength subsisted in supporting the weak against the strong. He cared more about people than ceremony and melted down golden ecclesiastical vessels in order to ransom Christians from Goths who'd raided the province. He was fearless before imperial power. When the Arian Empress Justina with imperial troops surrounded a church where Ambrose was worshiping with his followers that she wished to take over for the sake of Arian worship, he refused to budge; he and his followers simply sang hymns that he himself had composed until she finally gave in and left. When a few years later the Eastern emperor **Theodosius**—who was himself orthodox, an adherent of the Nicene Creed, took over as sole Emperor of the entire empire, east and west, and in anger at the death of a Roman commander of imperial troops in Thessalonica, slaughtered some 7000 citizens of that city gathered in a circus there, Ambrose face him down at the entrance to church and refused him entrance until he show public signs of repentance. Here we have it: a bishop standing up to power insisting that the Church, that Christ, had spiritual authority over a secular ruler; that before Christ, a ruler was no more than a simple Christian and subject to the same need for repentance and faith as any other. It was a magnificent moment and one that the church in the West never forgot. Here is why.

#### **IV. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (347-407).**

In the Eastern Roman Empire, at precisely the same time, one of the greatest preachers of all time, John of Constantinople, otherwise known as John the Golden Mouthed, or John Chrysostom, was preaching about the evil of those who were sumptuously clothed, and how they were depriving the poor, the orphan, the widow and the laborer, building their palaces upon the broken lives and miseries of these poor, and would one day be judged for it. John was immensely popular, crowds would come just for the entertainment value to hear him and interrupt his sermons with applause to his irritation. He was more interested in them putting his words into practice. He was so popular in Antioch, he previous parish, that Imperial authorities had had to kidnap him against his will to bring him to Constantinople, lest the streets break out in riots in Antioch. At **Hagia Sophia**, the magnificent cathedral in Constantinople where John preached—the largest in Christendom which still exists to this day, though as a Museum, the crowds would glance furtively at the Empress Eudoxia as John preached against the rich. He reformed the clergy; he faced down power in protecting lives. But it wasn't long before the Empress had John exiled for his words condemning luxury. No sooner than he was exiled was there an earthquake people considered a sign from God; the streets boiled with anger; and the emperor had him returned. But John was not one to back down. He was not a diplomat. He'd almost broken his health through ascetic practices while a young man for six years as he practiced the hermit life before becoming a priest in Antioch, and his will was still a will of iron. He got under the skin of the emperor and his wife again. This time, he was exiled even further away. From exile, he wrote letter upon letter to bishops around the Roman world. They

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in turn, wrote to the emperor in his defense, but it wasn't enough. He was sent even further away, and this time the soldiers, having reached an understanding with the Emperor, put him on a forced march which completely broke his health. As he lay dying he prayed. His last recorded words were: **“In all things Glory to God. Amen.”** However, in the East, in Constantinople, a pattern had been established that was the direct opposite of that in Rome: In Constantinople the imperial authority reigned over the Church. It appointed its bishops. It brooked no opposition among the clergy.

As a result in Byzantium, in what was to become the East Orthodox Church, the Emperor was, till the fall of Byzantium in 1453, to be the undisputed head of the Church; whereas in the Roman and Latin west, two powers were to be perpetually sparring for authority over the same flock: The King and the Church. And the King could be called on the carpet by the Church which could point to Scripture and refuse him the Mass. There is another reason for this double power of course, and that is that the political power that is the Roman Empire fell in the West, but the Bishop of Rome remained and continued to exercise his authority. In time his authority was strengthened over churches in Gaul and elsewhere. This pattern was established at this very time, in the fifth century, especially during the episcopate of Leo the Great who was bishop between 440 and 461. During the tumultuous events of that time as barbarians poured into the West, he established his authority over his flock in various areas of the West, be it Italy, France, Spain, or Britain. The result of this was that in the West, an ecclesiastical power grew which rivaled the political power in any given country. For this reason, a single monarchical/political power could not hold all authority, both spiritual and secular, and a ruler's power could never be completely absolute. A strong opposing voice could address him from Rome, even deny him communion, and within his own country, bishops and clergy could be made to obey that voice, in disobedience to their King. And a seed bed was prepared for democracy. This should be contrasted with the situation in the East where the Roman Empire centered in Constantinople would continue for another thousand years, and where power was absolute. It is undoubtedly one of the reasons a different model for power, one of a strong autocrat, has arisen in Russia, whereas the West developed a sense of freedom and a balance of powers.

John Chrysostom, the Golden Mouthed, died in the year 407 on his forced march to a hamlet on the shores of the Black Sea. Ambrose, bishop of Milan died in the year 397. It was an Eastern Sunday.

#### EXERPT FROM JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

First of seven Sermons on Lazarus and the Rich Man, extracted from On Wealth and Poverty,  
Popular Patristics Series

PLEASE READ: WHAT ARE YOUR OBSERVATIONS?

*“Now, what Christ teaches by the parable is this. There was a rich man, He says, living in great wickedness. The man was not tested by any misfortune, but everything flowed to him as if from a fountain. The very words, 'He made merry every day,' imply that nothing unexpected happened to him, no cause of distress or disturbance in his life. It is evident that he lived in*

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wickedness both from the end which fell to his lot and, before the end, from his contempt for the poor man. He himself has demonstrated that not only did he neglect that man by the gate but he did not give alms to anyone else either. For if he did not give alms to this man who was continually prostrate at his gate, lying before his eyes, whom he had to see every day once or twice or many times as he went in and out, for the man was not lying in the street nor in a hidden or narrow place, but where the rich man whenever he made his entrance or exit was forced unwillingly to see him, if (I say) he did not give alms to this man, who lay in such grievous suffering, and lied in such destitution, or rather for his whole life was troubled by chronic illness of the most serious kind, whom of those he encountered would he ever have been moved to pity? If we suppose that he passed the man by on the first day, he would probably have felt some pity on the second day; if he overlooked him even on that day, he surely ought to have been moved on the third or the fourth or the day after that, even if he were more cruel than the wild beasts. But he felt no such emotion, but became harder-hearted and more reckless even than that unjust judge who knew neither fear of God nor shame before men. For the widow's persistence persuaded that judge, cruel and savage though he was, to grant the favor. He was moved to pity at her supplication; but even persistence could not move this rich man to help the poor man, although his petition was not equivalent to the widow's, but much easier to fulfill and more just. For she besought the judge to aid her against her enemies, but he begged the rich man to release him from hunger and not to ignore him as he lay dying. She pestered the judge with her petition, but he appeared to the rich man many times each day lying in silence. This is enough to soften even the heart of stone. For when we are pestered we often become harder; but when we see those who need help standing by in complete silence, uttering no sound, not complaining though never satisfied, but merely appearing to us in silence, even if we are more insensible than the very stones, we become ashamed at the excess of politeness and are moved to pity. And another fact was not less significant than these, that the very appearance of the poor man was pitiful, as he was overcome by hunger and long illness. Nevertheless none of this tamed that savage man."

"This cruelty is the worst kind of wickedness; it is an inhumanity without rival. For it is not the same thing for one who lives in poverty not to help those in need, as for one who enjoys such luxury to neglect others who are wasting away with hunger. Again, it is not the same thing to see a poor man once or twice and pass him by, as to look at him every day and not be aroused by the persistent sight to mercy and generosity. Again, it is not the same thing for one who is troubled in his heart by misfortune and distress not to help his neighbor, as for one who enjoys such happiness and continuous good fortune to neglect others who are wasting away with hunger, to lock up his heart, and not to be made more generous by his own joy. For you surely know this, that even if we are the most savage of men, we usually are made more gentle and kindly by good fortune. But that man was not improved by his prosperity, but remained beastly, or rather he surpassed the cruelty and inhumanity of any beast in his behavior."

## V. MARTIN OF TOURS

The last figure of whom I'd like to speak today, is Martin of Tours. If I mention him, it is because he was a missionary figure who left a legacy of monasteries and a reputation that became literally, legendary. He is one of the patron saints of France, and so, I reserve a special

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place for him. His life was limited to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and as such falls within the purview of today's class.

What do we know about him?

Martin of Tours converted at the age of ten against his father's wishes, probably in what is now Hungary where his father was serving the Roman legions. In 326 he sneaked off to a local church and became a catechumen, that is, began studying for baptism. Constantine had already made Christianity legal and begun to favor it, but this influence was felt mostly in the largest cities. In outlying areas, such as Hungary, it was still very much in the minority. The military leaders were heavily into the worship of Mithras. So his father, learning of his conversion, was not happy. As was generally the custom, sons took up the professions of their fathers, and so, at age 15, in 331, Martin took his place in the Cavalry. He was stationed in what is now Amiens, France (central Gaul). Martin was deeply pious, treating his slave as a brother, often doing the tasks of a servant on behalf of his slave: cleaning his boots, waiting on him at table. In the year 335, during an extremely harsh winter when many were dying of cold, he came across a poor man half naked, shivering and asking for alms. Martin had nothing to give, so he took his sword and cut his own cape in half and gave it to the man. Bystanders laughed as he put his mutilated cloak back on. That night he had a vision and saw Christ wearing the half of his cape with which he'd clothed the beggar and heard Christ say in a loud voice to the angels: "Here is Martin, the Roman soldier who is not yet baptized; yet he has clad me."

The cloak was preserved among the relic collection of the Merovingian kings of the Franks. During the Medieval Ages, Frankish Kings would carry St. Martin's cloak, which is called *cappa* in Latin into battle as a holy relic. The priest who cared for the cloak was called a *cappellanus*, and ultimately all priests who served the military were called *cappellani*. The French translation is *chapelains*, which is where the English word, *chaplain* derives from. One of the many services a chaplain can provide is spiritual and pastoral support for military service personnel by performing religious services at sea or in the battlefield.

The dream confirmed Martin in his piety and he was baptized at the age of 18. He served in the military for another two years until, just before a battle with the Gauls at Worms in 336, at age 20, Martin determined that his faith prohibited him from fighting, saying, "I am a soldier of Christ. I cannot fight." He was charged with cowardice and jailed, but in response to the charge, he volunteered to go unarmed to the front of the troops. His superiors planned to take him up on the offer, but before they could, the invaders sued for peace, the battle never occurred, and Martin was released from military service.

He declared his vocation and made his way to the city of Tours, where he became a disciple of Hilary of Poitiers, a chief proponent of Trinitarian Christianity, opposing the Arianism of the Visigothic nobility. When Hilary was forced into exile from Poitiers, Martin returned to Italy taking shelter on an island where he lived for a time as a hermit.

When Hilary returned to his see in 361 Martin joined him and established a monastery nearby at the site that developed into the Benedictine Ligugé Abbey, the first in Gaul. It became a center for the evangelization of the country districts. He traveled and preached through western Gaul. "The memory of these apostolic journeyings survives to our day in the numerous local miracles of which Martin is the hero and which indicate roughly the routes that he followed.

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(Catholic Encyclopedia).

In 371, Martin was acclaimed Bishop of Tours, where he impressed the city with his demeanor and by the enthusiasm with which he had pagan temples, altars and sculptures destroyed. It may indicate the depth of the Druidic folk religion compared to the veneer of Roman classical culture in the area, that “when in a certain village he had demolished a very ancient temple, and had set about cutting down a pine-tree which stood close to the temple, the chief priest of that place, and a crowd of other heathens began to oppose him; and these people, though under the influence of the Lord, they had been quiet while the temple was being overthrown, could not patiently allow the tree to be cut down, and Martin was forced to withdraw to **Marmoutier** where he and some 80 companions lived in caves in the river cliffs (Johnson, page 142). This is not to be confused with Marmoutier in the Alsace on the German border, but is rather an Abbey near Tours.

Martin founded numerous monasteries. He became so popular in the public imagination that it is difficult to sort through what is legend and what is history in the miracles attributed to him. Some 3,900 parishes in France bear his name in one form or another.

One episode of his ministry is well attested, however. Around 384, a theologian and Church leader in Avila, Spain named **Priscillian**, gathered a following around himself preaching a severe asceticism and condemnation of marriage among his followers. Men and women were forbidden to marry. This was condemned by a local synod and that condemnation became known and was confirmed by the church at large. Priscillian was threatened, and escaped to Gaul. There a group of bishops discovered him and brought him to the western emperor at the time, **Magnus Maximus**, a usurper who subsequently was defeated by Theodosian. These bishops sought to have Priscillian condemned to death. Martin heard of this, and though he deplored and profoundly disagreed with him, intervened on his behalf before the emperor to save his life, saying that the state had no business in condemning heretics. Maximus stayed the execution. However, when Martin left to pursue his ordinary ministry, the local bishop intervened, pushed the emperor to action, and, in **the year 385**, Priscillian and five of his colleagues were beheaded. This was the first state execution in the name of Christianity of heretics. Martin was furious and profoundly grieved. He refused to have relations with the bishop afterwards until forced by the emperor. Martin was deeply opposed to capital punishment for heretical views, or any intervention by the State in the affairs of the Church.

**A few interesting facts relating to Martin:** From the late 4th century to the late Middle Ages much of Western Europe including Great Britain, engaged in a period of fasting beginning on the day after St. Martin's Day, November 11. This fast period lasted 40 days, and was, therefore, called *Quadragesima Sancti Martini*, which means in Latin "the forty days of St. Martin." At St. Martin's eve and on the feast day, people ate and drank very heartily for a last time before they started to fast. This fasting time was later called "Advent" by the Church.

Martin is now credited with a prominent role in the spreading **wine-making throughout the Touraine region** and facilitated the planting of many vines.

## VI. THEODOSIUS I

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We need to conclude with a word about Theodosian, the emperor at the time of Ambrose. Theodosius I, (11 January 347 – 17 January 395), also known as **Theodosius the Great**, was **Roman Emperor** from **379 to 395**. Theodosius was the last emperor to rule over both the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire, having defeated Magnus Maximus to gain control of Gaul, Britain, and Spain. During his reign Goths crossed the Danube and settled south of it in what we now know as Romania and the Balkans, an area that was officially part of the Roman Empire. The Goths were increasingly employed as mercenaries, but agitated for more pay and more land. Soon they were being pressed further west by other tribes such as the Huns, to the east of them. It was the beginning of the end for the western Roman Empire. Only 15 years after Theodosian's death, Rome would be sacked (410 A.D.). **Theodosian issued decrees that effectively made Christianity the official state religion of the Empire.** Theodosius was a Trinitarian, that is Nicene Christian. **On 27 February 380**, he declared the Catholic Church the only legitimate Imperial religion, ending state support for the traditional Roman religion.

#### **QUESTION:**

We've seen several figures today with a certain attitude toward the State and State Power: Ambrose opposed Theodosian and refused him communion because of his slaughter of 7000 Thessalonians. The emperor backed down. John Chrysostom, preached against the luxury and cruelty of the rich in the presence of the Empress. He was sent into exile and died on a forced march. Martin of Tours opposed the infliction of the death penalty by the state upon religious dissidents or any intervention of the state in church affairs. Theodosian established Christianity as the only official religion.

**What should be the principles which should guide the relationship between the Church and the State? What should guide Christians in their attitude toward the state and state officials? What principles can we set down?**

Recommended reading: *City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era*: by Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner, published by Moody Publishers, 2010.