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## Practicing the Politics of Jesus

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Summing up the ambiguity of the Roman emperor Constantine, and what has come to be called Constantinianism, the classical scholar Charles Norris Cochrane writes that Constantine may be unique, "the one human being to have enjoyed the distinction of being deified as a pagan god, while, at the same time, he was popularly venerated as a Christian saint."[1] Allegedly seeing a vision of Christ's cross in the sky as he rode into battle, Constantine was the first emperor to convert (at least ostensibly) to what had been a despised and dismissed "slave religion." For better and for worse, this conversion changed history.

What might be called the Constantinian shift began around the year 200 and took over two hundred years to grow and unfold in full bloom.[2] Thus it began before Constantine's birth and matured after his death. Yet this monumental shift well deserves his name. Not only was he the first emperor to convert, he made his aim the legislation of Christ's millennial kingdom in a generation.[3] And indeed, he enacted a number of laws that no doubt pleased the church of his day—making divorce difficult, aiding the poor, and ending the gladiatorial games, for instance. Less grandiosely but more lastingly, Constantine was the first in what would be a long line of emperors, princes, and presidents who saw Christianity as the unifying force that might bind and discipline their otherwise diverse subjects.

I do not want to pretend that the pre-Constantinian church was all good and the church after Constantine all bad. From Pentecost onward, the church has always lived in tension, never, as even a cursory reading of 1 Corinthians reminds us, being more than comparatively faithful. "Constantinianism," then, is not an excuse for ignoring or despising the

history of the church beyond the New Testament. The significance of the symbol or concept of Constantinianism is to indicate that the pre-Constantinian church did not see itself as the sponsor of the world, with "world" here meaning the fallen and rebellious creation.

Sponsorship is a tricky affair, as soda pop and automobile makers nervously demonstrate when their celebrity commits a crime or loses the national championship. Etymologically, the word springs from the Latin *sponsus*, which has to do with guaranteeing and taking responsibility for the achievement of a desired outcome. The guarantor warrants, pledges, or promises for that which is guaranteed. So guarantors are re*spons*ible for payment on a loan if the debtor defaults on it. Here is where sponsorship gets tricky. Whose identity and purpose is more determinant, the sponsor's or the sponsored's?

In baptismal sponsorship, the sponsor's identity and purposes are more fundamental and determinant than those of the baptismal candidate—often, as in my Anglican tradition, an infant with only the most nascent identity and purposes of its own. Here the candidate is sponsored into the Christian community and faith, on that community's and faith's terms. The sponsor will, in *The Book of Common Prayer*'s words, "be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life."[4]

But there are other kinds of sponsorship. Surely the most pervasive in our time is commercial sponsorship. In the commercial realm a sponsor wants to associate with an athlete, movie star, television program, or celebrated event in order to gain prominence and favorability through the sponsored's visibility and popularity. So Nike sponsored Michael Jordan, one of the most famous athletes in the history of any game. No one seriously believed Nike shoes enabled him to defy gravity, to slip Houdini-like through three defenders for the score, to consistently slacken spectators' jaws with amazement. In this case, the sponsor's identity and purposes are clearly less fundamental than the sponsored's. Visit Chicago's Niketown—a five-story shrine disguised as a department store—and you will find encased for adoration not only Jordan's footwear and jerseys, but a wall-sized poster of the shoe-god soaring through the sky. Nike quite successfully wants people to associate their goods with basketball magic; Michael Jordan Just Does It.

Similarly, it is with the Constantinian shift that the church decides to derive its significance through association with the identity and purposes of the state. In the pre-Constantinian setting, the church saw the state as having a preservative function. It was "to serve God by encouraging the good and restraining evil, i.e., to serve peace, to preserve the

social cohesion in which the leaven of the gospel can build the church" and render the present age more tolerable.[5] All this made the state important, but hardly central. The church considered itself, not the state, to be carrying the meaning of history. In the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, it is "through the church" that "the wisdom of God in its rich variety" is made known "to the rulers and authorities" (Eph 3:10).

As theologian John Howard Yoder observes, the most "pertinent fact" of the Constantinian shift was not that the church was no longer persecuted, but that the two visible realities of church and world were fused. There was, in a sense, no longer anything to call "world"—state, economy, art, rhetoric, superstition, and war were all baptized.[6] Yoder summarizes the reversal neatly. Before Constantine, "Christians had known as a fact of experience that the Church existed, but had to believe against appearances that Christ ruled over the world. After Constantine one knew as a fact of experience that Christ was ruling over the world, but had to believe against the evidence that there existed a believing Church."[7]

Several important corollaries followed. With Constantine, Christian history begins to be told as the story of dynasties. The ruler, not the ordinary person, is made the model for ethical deliberations. The question is no longer, "How can we survive and remain faithful Christians under Caesar?" but "How can we adjust the church's expectations so that Caesar can consider himself a faithful Christian?" Thus the ethical requirements of the church were adapted to the level of what might be called "respectable unbelief."[8] The statesman must be seen as Christian, but without significantly changing his statecraft. The morality of a statement or action is tested on the basis of whether or not the ruler can meet such standards (say, telling the truth, or not killing). As Yoder writes, "The place of the church or of persons speaking for Christian morality . . . is that of 'chaplaincy,' i.e., a part of the power structure itself. The *content* of ethical guidance is not the teaching of Jesus but the duties of 'station,' 'office' or 'vocation.'"[9] Lawyers will play by the rules of the guild of lawyers, doctors by the guild of doctors, bankers by the guild of bankers, and so forth. Christian lawyers, doctors, and bankers may be different in some ways from their non-Christian colleagues, but they accept their professions as basically defined and regulated apart from the radical formative power of the Christian story.

In a real sense, then, it becomes fine and commendable for professing Christians to participate in the state and other realms of culture *as if* the lordship of Christ makes no concrete difference. Even for Christians,

culture begins to be seen as autonomous, as holding its own key to its establishment, maintenance, and true purposes. The church, in other words, created secularism, a secularism that even Christians must laud and obey.[10]

## PRIVATIZING THE CHURCH

After creating secularism, the church steadily but all too surely depoliticized and privatized the faith and mission of Jesus Christ. In his famous book *Christ and Culture,* H. Richard Niebuhr approvingly quotes the observation of Rabbi Joseph Klausner about just such a Jesus:

> Though Jesus was a product of [Jewish] culture, . . . he endan-gered it by abstracting religion and ethics from the rest of social life, and by looking for the establishment by divine power only of a "kingdom not of this world." Judaism, however, is not only religion and it is not only ethics: it is the sum-total of all the needs of the nation, placed on a religious basis. . . . Judaism is a national life. . . . Jesus came and thrust aside all requirements of national life. . . . In their stead, he set up nothing but an ethico-religious system bound up with his conception of the Godhead.[11]

But such a rendering of Jesus and his mission is only possible through a Constantinian grid. Now, as the Christian church's sponsor-ship of Western secular culture is less and less desired—and increasingly actively dismissed—it is not too much to say that a new consensus has evolved in scholarship on Jesus. What this consensus suggests is a con-clusion opposite to that of Klausner and Niebuhr. Though Constantin-ian Christians all too quickly forgot how to be good Jews, the new con-sensus recognizes that Jesus and the earliest, New Testament Christians did not. They were all (even the Gentiles) good Jews in the sense that Klausner thought they were not. That is, they saw themselves embody-ing a national, or social and political, way of life. Israel's story was, in a profound sense, their story—and they did not privatize, psychologize, and etherealize it to make it theirs.

Now that the long Constantinian age has all but passed, we Chris-tians find ourselves in a situation much more closely analogous to that of New Testament Christians than the Christendom for which some nos-talgically long. The Bible, it turns out, offers abundant resources for liv-

ing in a wildly diverse and contested world. With Constantine finally buried, theologians and biblical scholars find themselves able to reclaim, and present again to the church, the politics of Jesus.[12]

## Jesus' World

Perhaps the main reason that the Bible has, at least in recent centuries, seemed to offer scarce political or cultural guidance is that Christians have read a "rank anachronism" back into its text. The strict split between "religion" and "politics" belongs to centuries much later than the first. As N. T. Wright remarks, "No first-century Jew . . . could imagine that the worship of their god and the organization of human society were matters related only at a tangent."[13]

Even the most rank anachronizer will not deny that there is much of the political, the physical, the social, and economical throughout the Old Testament. Israel, after all, is a nation, an irrefutably political entity. And it is a political entity born of social, not merely psychological, rebellion—the revolt of slaves against what was then the world's most powerful empire, Egypt. The story of the nation Israel is, like that of all nations, one of conquest (the vanquishing of Canaan), of hierarchy and its powerplays (the kingdom of David), of hope and striving for justice as well as security. Israel's story, furthermore, does not become apolitical the moment it loses its capital and its land, and is sent into exile. The nation is scattered, but still a nation, and now a nation whose prophets hope strenuously for the restoration of that capital and land. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Micah, and Zechariah all cite Zion as the place of God's climactic (and clearly political) saving act.[14] So: "Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd of a flock'" (Jer 31:10).

Yet even if all this is recognized, there remains a strong tendency to imagine that the political and social dimensions of faith fell away at, or with, the birth of the church. A moment's pause reveals how untenable this assumption is. To make the earliest church asocial and apolitical is to suppose that suddenly the Jews of Jesus' day ceased worshiping a God that, for hundreds of years, their people had considered eminently involved with history and politics. In fact, Jesus proclaimed his message and gathered his disciples in a politically charged context. His was a society grinding under the oppression of a distant, colonizing empire, that of Rome. The Jews of Jesus' day and place, although they were

regathered in Palestine and had rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, considered themselves still in exile, "since the return from Babylon had not brought that independence and prosperity which the prophets foretold."[15] The Pharisees and other parties vying for control were in no sense "religious" in such a manner that their aims excluded the political, the social, and the economic. Their political agendas ranged from the most "conservative" (the Sadducees, most nearly allied with the occupying Romans and so least desirous of significant change) to the most radical (the dispossessed Zealots, who advocated violent revolution).[16]

To make good, faithful, and biblical sense of Jesus, we simply must take into account the world in which he lived and the problems he (or any other religious figure) was expected to address. Wright summarizes the situation: "Jewish society faced major external threats and major internal problems. The question, what it might mean to be a good and loyal Jew, had pressing social, economic and political dimensions as well as cultural and theological ones."[17] As various explorations of the psychologization of America have suggested, it is perhaps only the most affluent, socially stable people who can ignore social, economic, and political questions and concentrate on their abstracted inner well-being. Christian Science and other mind-cure groups so popular in the nineteenth century made no converts in Naples or Calcutta. Outside the United States, they appealed only to the English upper middle class. I doubt that Christian Science, or, for that matter, Christianity as it is now severely psychologized by many liberals and evangelicals alike, would have found many converts—or even had made any sense—to first-century Palestinian Jews. You might just as well have entered into an argument with them that the world was really round or that the earth was not the center of the cosmos. The anachronism, whether drawn from our physical sciences or our preoccupation with individualistic psychology, is equally rank.

Wright emphasizes that "the pressing needs of most Jews of the period had to do with liberation—from oppression, from debt, from Rome." None of this is to suggest for a moment that Jewish (and Jesus') faith was purely political, whatever that might mean. But it does suggest that other issues "were regularly seen in this [political] light." This context—the actual context of Jesus' life and work—renders incredible Troeltsch's confident assertion that the "values of redemption" preached by Jesus were "purely inward" and led "naturally to a sphere of painless bliss."[18] The hope of Israel was, as Wright puts it, not for "disembodied bliss" after death, "but for a national liberation that would fulfill the expectations aroused by the memory, and regular celebration, of the exodus. . . . Hope focused on the coming of the kingdom of Israel's God."[19]

## LANGUAGE MATTERS

Indeed, given such blatantly political language as "exodus" and "kingdom," it can be difficult to comprehend how we have managed to so thoroughly privatize the New Testament faith. Of no less political provenance than "kingdom" is the term gospel, or *evangel.* In the Greco-Roman world from which the early church adopted it, "gospel" was a public proclamation of, say, a war won, borne by a herald who ran back to the city and, with his welcome political news, occasioned public celebration.[20] Christian ethicist Allen Verhey suggests that Mark, in calling what he had written a "Gospel," was meaning to evoke *evangel* as it was used within the Roman cult of emperor to refer to the announcements of the birth of an heir to the throne, of the heir's coming of age, accession to the throne, and so forth. If so, the writer of the Gospel is comparing the Kingdom of God come in Jesus to the quite this-worldly and political kingdom of Caesar.[21] It would not be amiss to translate "The Gospel According to Mark" as "The Political Tidings According to Mark." In short, if Mark in his world had wanted to convey a privatistic and individualistic account of Jesus' life and death, he could have thought of many better things to call it than a Gospel (Mk 1:1).

No less political is the language used to describe the church's worship. Our word "liturgy" comes from the Greek meaning "work of the people," or, as we might put it now, a "public work." In Roman society, "to build a bridge for a public road across a stream on one's private property would constitute a liturgy." Military service at one's own expense was an act of liturgy. The wealthy sought favor by sponsoring lavish "liturgies"—huge dramas for the entertainment of the citizenry. *Leitourgoi,* or, very roughly, "liturgists," in the secular Greek usage of the times referred to government officials.[22] "Worship," to modern, privatized Christian ears, too easily connotes escape from the world (we worship, after all, in a "sanctuary"), a removal from the political and the social. Yet inasmuch as we read these connotations onto the word in its New Testament context we are saying something oxymoronic like the "private public work" of the church. The New Testament Christians themselves, I submit, were not so confused.

No less cultural and political is the very word used to describe the new community of God. "Church" (the Greek *ekklēsia)* from the fifth century B.C. onward referred to the assembly of citizens called to decide matters affecting the common welfare.[23] The Hebrew *qahal* denotes a solemn, deliberative assembly of Israel's tribes. The assembly par excel-

lence, for example, was at Mount Sinai, where the Law was received
(Deut 9:10, 18:16). When the ancient Jews translated the Old Testament
into Greek, *qahal* was rendered *ekklēsia*. This is the term Christians
seized on to describe their own assemblies. Thus the *"Ekklēsia* of God"
means roughly the same thing as what New Englanders might call the
"town meeting of God."[24]

Given all this, it is unsurprising that early observers of Christianity
were not struck by its "religious" (in our privatized sense) qualities.
What struck outsiders, says Wright, was the church's "total way of
life"—or in my terms, its culture.[25] The Romans called Christians "athe-
ists" (they refused cultic emperor worship) and classified Christianity as
a political society. So classifying Christianity meant that it was under a
ban on corporate ritual meals, much as many governments down to the
present ban the "free assembly" of those considered subversive. Chris-
tians, says Wright, "were seen not just as a religious grouping, but one
whose religion made them a subversive presence within the wider
Roman society."[26] There can be no doubt that Rome consistently saw
Jews and early Christians as a social and political problem and took
action against them accordingly.

Of course, we know that the Romans misunderstood both Jews and
Christians on many counts. Did they also grossly misconstrue their
intentions here? The thoroughly political language adopted by the
church suggests otherwise. The clincher is that if the early church had
wanted itself and its purpose to be construed in privatistic and individ-
ualistic terms, there were abundant cultural and legal resources at hand
for it to do just that. The early church could easily have escaped Roman
persecution by suing for status as a *cultus privatus,* or "private cult"
dedicated to "the pursuit of a purely personal and otherworldly salva-
tion for its members" like so many other religious groups in that world.[27]
Yet instead of adopting the language of the privatized mystery religions,
the church confronted Caesar, not exactly *on* his own terms, but *with* his
own terms. As Wayne Meeks summarizes the matter, early Christian
moral practices

> are essentially communal. Even those practices that are urged
> upon individuals in the privacy of their homes . . . are exten-
> sions of the community's practice—indeed they are means of
> reminding individuals even when alone that they are not merely
> devotees of the Christians' God, they are members of Christ's
> body, the people of God. That was how the Christian movement
> differed most visibly from the other cults that fit more easily

into the normal expectations of "religion" in the Roman world. The Christians' practices were not confined to sacred occasions and sacred locations—shrines, sacrifices, processions—but were integral to the formation of communities with a distinctive self-awareness.[28]

The original Christians, in short, were about creating and sustaining a unique culture—a way of life that would shape character in the image of their God. And they were determined to be a culture, a quite public and political culture, even if it killed them and their children.

## BIBLICAL FAITH ON THE GROUND

What I am suggesting is that the Constantinian church, for many centuries, responded to the world in such a manner that it lost a sense of itself as an alternative way of life. Most immediately, the late Constantinian modern belief in some truths (preeminently scientific truths) as acultural and ahistorical truths made it seem as if there was a neutral, nonperspectival viewpoint available to anyone, anywhere who was rational and well-meaning. In that atmosphere, much of the church thought it necessary to divide Christianity into (1) private truths, or values, to be confirmed by individuals apart from any communal and political context, and (2) public truths, or facts, which consisted of Christianity translated into acultural and ahistorical truths, "essences" more or less instantiated in all viable cultures.

But this was distorting, since Christianity, like Judaism, is historically based. It concerns what has happened with a particular people, namely ancient Israel, and through a particular man who lived and died in a specific time and place, namely Jesus the Nazarene, "crucified under Pontius Pilate." It is true that most religions posit a god who in no way can be pinned down or identified by time and place. But not so the religion of the Israelites. As Robert Jenson observes,

> Other ancient peoples piled up divine names; the comprehensiveness of a god's authority was achieved by blurring his particularity, by identification of initially distinct numina with one another, leading to a grandly vague deity-in-general. Israel made the opposite move. Israel's salvation depended precisely on unambiguous identification of her God over against the generality of the numinous.[29]

The God of Israel simply is he who led Israel out of Egypt, established it in the Promised Land, abandoned it to exile and promised some day, somehow, to end that exile. Thus Israel's God can only be identified narratively, by the telling of this story. That is why, "In the Bible the name of God and the narration of his works . . . belong together. The descriptions that make the name work are items of the narrative. And conversely, identifying God, backing up the name, is the very function of the biblical narrative."[30]

Accordingly, when those not born into the heritage of Israel later come to know and worship Israel's singular God, they can only do so through this same story—but now extended and made more encompassing by the life, teachings, death and resurrection of the Jew Jesus. Put bluntly, Christians "*know how* to pray to the Father, daring to call him 'Father,' because they pray with Jesus his Son."[31]

In modernity, this particularity was such a scandal that many Christians acted as if (and sometimes outright argued that) everyone of all and sundry faiths worshiped the same "God" and that the story of Israel and Jesus was secondary to knowing this "God." Now in post-Constantinian postmodernity, all communities and traditions (including the scientific) are called back to their inescapable and particular histories.[32] Christianity no longer need worry about its "scandal of particularity," since it is recognized that particularity "scandalizes" everyone. The upshot for Christians is that the church does not have to aspire any more to a supposedly neutral language and story; now we can freely speak our own language and tell our own story.

To phrase it only slightly differently, we can now embrace, more wholeheartedly than we could under the modern regime, what might be called the Bible's narrative logic. Modernity pushed us toward a logic, or way of seeing and thinking, concerned to find "universal" and "reasonable" principles that could be embraced apart from any historical tradition. Modern "logic" is at work in Matthew Arnold's eagerness to think that Greek philosophy, Jewish faith, and indeed "all great spiritual disciplines" move toward the same goal. All alike, says Arnold, now quoting Christian scripture, aim for the final end "that we might be partakers of the divine nature."[33] Yet there have been and are many divinities worshiped and admired by humanity. What divine nature do we aspire to? Will we partake of Zeus's caprice? The Mayan god's lust for human blood? And how do "great spiritual disciplines" that claim no divinity (such as Buddhism) then partake of this selfsame divine nature?

Biblical logic, by contrast, does not search for disembodied, abstracted essences. It is historical through and through. It deals with

particular characters and events unfolding over time, and as such it is narrative, or story-based. Hence the God who will later elect Israel creates the heavens and the earth, then suffers its rebellion (Gn 1–3). Spiritual, political, familial, and economic division and alienation ensue (Gn 4–11). Now this specific Creator God decides to reclaim the world. Yet this God is not a very good modernist, and so aims to reclaim the world not by calling the divided peoples to "principles" or "essences" that somehow reside within all of them. Instead God chooses a particular man, Abraham, and promises to make of him a "great nation" through which "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gn 12:2–3).

The rest of the Old Testament is the story of this God's refusal to give up on a chosen, if often fickle and unfaithful, people. Israel is that strange and great nation elected to wrestle with the strange and great God Yahweh down through the centuries. This election is often not such an appealing privilege, since the God who has chosen Israel will judge Israel when it departs from its covenant (Is 7:9). Yet God, even if God sometimes judges, will not relinquish a sure grip on the descendants of Abraham and Jacob. As Ben Meyer writes, "Though any generation in Israel might fall victim to catastrophic judgment, Israel itself will never go under."[34] Once again biblical narrative logic is relentlessly particular. Thus most of Israel may stray, but God will snatch a remnant from the lion's mouth (Am 3:12) and make it "the new locus of election and the seed of national restoration."[35] Ultimately confident in God's election, Israel suffers its national ups and downs, but persists in looking ahead to a new reign like glorious David's (Am 9:11–15; Is 11:1–9; Jer 30:8–9). It hopes in a new and paradisal Zion (Is 2:2–4, 28:16), a new covenant (Jer 31:31–34), and vindication in the teeth of its national enemies (Ps 137). So:

> Listen to me, my people,
> and give heed to me, my nation;
> for a teaching will go out from me,
> and my justice for a light to the peoples.
> I will bring near my deliverance swiftly,
> my salvation has gone out
> and my arms will rule the peoples. (Is 51:4–5)

As N. T. Wright memorably puts it,

> This is what Jewish monotheism looked like on the ground. It was not a philosophical or metaphysical analysis of the inner

being of a god, or the god. It was the unshakable belief that the
one god who made the world was Israel's god, and that he
would defend his hill against all attackers or usurpers. To the
extent that Israel thought of her god in "universal" terms, this
universal was from the beginning made known in and through
the particular, the material, the historical.[36]


## THE NEW TESTAMENT IN THE
## LIGHT OF JEWISH POLITICS

It is according to the rules of this narrative logic that Jesus under-
stood his mission and the early church interpreted its Lord and its life.[37]
Exactly twelve disciples, one for each of the tribes of ancient Israel, are
chosen. This is but one sign that the church saw itself as Israel's seed
restored, and that a crucial aspect of its early mission was to call on all
Israel to claim its heritage.[38] The disciples were a flock (Lk 12:32) des-
tined to be scattered (Mk 14:27; Jn 16:32) much as Israel had been scat-
tered. But like Israel they would be regathered (Mk 14:28; Jn 16:17, 22)
and enjoy kingly rule when God drew the world's drama to its end
(Lk 12:32; Mt 19:28).[39]

Following the Bible's narrative logic, Israel and the disciple remnant
within it is saved in even more specific terms. Everything depends on the
single man, Jesus, who takes onto himself the history and destiny of
Israel. Thus, like Israel, Jesus was the one called out of Egypt (Mt 2:15).
Like Israel, Jesus wanders, is tempted and fed by God in the wilderness.
Like Israel, Jesus cares for the poor, the orphaned, and the stranger.

Jesus of Nazareth, as he apparently understood himself and cer-
tainly as he is interpreted by the New Testament documents, was a liv-
ing recapitulation of Israel's history. More precisely, Jesus did not merely
copy the history of Israel, but realized it afresh in terms of his own life
and obedience. By so doing, he re-presented not only Israel's past but its
future, what it would come to be through Yahweh's mighty consum-
mating works.[40] Hence Jesus (with and through his disciples) will build
a new and unsurpassable temple.

Now it is crucial to recall how important the temple was to the bib-
lical story. Within Israel, the temple bore manifold social, spiritual,
political, economic, and cultural importance. In contemporary America,
it would be the equivalent of the entire range of our iconic political and
cultural institutions: the White House, Capitol Hill, the National

Cathedral, Wall Street, and Hollywood.[41] More than this, Jerusalem, in a profound theological sense, was considered the center of the earth—the hill Yahweh would defend against all attackers. And at the center of Jerusalem was the temple, in whose inner chambers the King of the Universe was known to dwell with an especially awesome presence. To this temple's courts all the world would someday stream, bearing offerings and worshiping the earth's one true God—Israel's Lord (Ps 96:8–10).[42]

In this light it is hard to overstate the significance of Jesus' climactic few days in Jerusalem. His entry on a donkey identifies him with the lowly and peaceable king of Zec 9:9. His attack on the temple, if so it may be called, simultaneously critiques Israel theologically, culturally, politically, socially, and economically. And since the temple was the center not only of Israel but the universe, the cleansing of the temple purifies not only of Israel but the entire cosmos.[43] Jesus and the church together, furthermore, are the new temple, a temple whose splendor will exceed that of any built with human hands (Mk 14:58; cf. 2 Sm 7:4–17 and Hg 2:9).

But the new temple will be built in three days—the span of time between Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection—which means it can be built only through Jesus' death. So Jesus proceeds to his death. Under covenantal dynamics, Israel is blessed when it responds obediently to God and cursed when it strays. Roman-occupied Israel, as I have noted, still considered itself in exile, under the curse. But Jesus the Christ (Messiah-King) represents Israel, so can take on himself Israel's curse and exhaust it.[44] He perishes as King of the Jews, at the hand of the Romans, whose oppression is "the present, and climactic, form of the curse of exile itself. The crucifixion of the Messiah is, one might say, the *quintessence* of the curse of the exile, and its climactic act."[45]

Narrative logic, then, reveals the significance of Jesus' resurrection. As David Hume was to observe many centuries later in impeccable modern terms, if Jesus was raised from the dead that *in and of itself* proves nothing except that a first-century man in a backwater country somehow survived death. It is only within the context of Israel's story that Jesus' resurrection assumes its supreme significance. For this was not just any man who died, but a man who took onto himself Israel's story. And within Israel's story, resurrection had long functioned as a symbol for the reconstitution of Israel, the return from exile, and the crowning redemption. In the Israel of Jesus' day, resurrection was seen as the divine reward for martyrs, particularly those who died in the great and final tribulation and brought Israel to its own divine reward. The prophet Ezekiel, for instance, saw the return of Israel in the figure of

bones rising and taking flesh (37: 1–14). Since at least Ezekiel, the symbol of corpses returning to life not only denoted Israel's return from exile, but implied a renewal of the covenant and all creation. So Jesus' resurrection was nothing less than the monumental vindication (or justification) of Israel's hopes and claims. Israel has claimed throughout its history that its God is the single Creator God, and Jesus' resurrection at last redeems that claim.[46]

Recall one more time the Bible's narrative logic. Israel's God is universal, but known as such only through the particular, the material, the historical. God elects Abraham, and from Abraham a nation, and from that nation Jesus. Now from Israel and Jesus flows God's blessings on all the world. God restores Israel then, building on this event, God seeks the Gentiles. As Meyer writes, "This scheme is recurrent in Acts. First, the word is offered to the Jews, who split into camps of believers and unbelievers. The believers by their faith constitute restored Israel, heir of the covenant and promises. Now and only now may gentiles find salvation, precisely by assimilation to restored Israel."[47]

The early Christians saw themselves as continuing Israel's story under new circumstances. The church "understood itself now as messianic Israel covenanted with her risen Lord" (Acts 2:38, 5:30–32).[48] It, with Jesus' headship, is the new temple, the sanctuary of the living God. It in fact is nothing less than the first fruits of a new humanity, reborn in the last Adam named Jesus. Thus the church was seen, by itself and others, as a "third race," neither Jew nor Gentile but a new and holy nation or people (*hagios ethnoi*—1 Pt 2:9). Narrative logic drives home to a theological conclusion that is unavoidably cultural and political.

Consider Eph 2:11–22. Here the Gentile addressees of the letter are reminded that before Christ they existed in the political status of "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," and as a consequence "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no home and without God in the world" (v. 12). But now "by the blood of Christ" the Gentiles—we members of disparate nations among whom Israel was sent as a light and an example—have been made part of the same humanity as Israel (vv. 13–15). Christ has broken down the dividing wall between the Hebrews and the Gentiles, for "he is our peace" (v. 14). This is not a peace of mere inner, psychological tranquility: it is the peace of two reconciled peoples, a peace made possible by the change wrought "through the cross" (v. 16), a change of nothing less than the political and cultural status of the Gentiles from "aliens" to "*citizens* with the saints" (v. 19).

Thus Christian faith, far from being a matter solely between the individual and God, amounts to being grafted into a new people. For the

writer to the Ephesians, those who are justified are justified because they believe the gospel and through it become God's covenant people. Gentiles, through baptism, are incorporated into the body and life of God's particular, historical people. Baptism is initiation into a new culture, a culture called church that now, exactly as a political and social entity, is poised at the pivot point of world history. As theologian John Milbank puts it, "The *logic* of Christianity involves the claim that the 'interruption' of history by Christ and his bride, the Church, is the most fundamental of events, interpreting all other events." The church claims to "exhibit the exemplary form of human community" and as such "it is *most especially* a social event, able to interpret other social formations, because it compares them with its own new social practice."[49]

In short, the church understands itself as a new and unique culture. The church is at once a community and a history—a history still unfolding and developing, embodying and passing along a story that provides the symbols through which its people gain their identity and their way of seeing the world. The church as a culture has its own language and grammar, in which words such as *love* and *service* are crucial and are used correctly only according to certain "rules." The church as a culture carries and sustains its own way of life, which includes:

- a particular way of eating, learned in and through the Eucharist.
- a particular way of handling conflict, the peculiar politics called "forgiveness" and learned through the example and practice of Jesus and his cross.
- a particular way of perpetuating itself, through evangelism rather than biological propagation.

In its existence as a culture, the church is eminently Jewish. Only in certain Constantinian, and peculiarly modern, terms could it regard its mission as acultural, its gospel as ahistorical, its existence as apolitical. Instead, what political scientist Gordon Lafer says of the Jewish nation and its witness is true as well of the church:

> [The Jewish emphasis on] social solidarity . . . helps to make sense of the concept of a "chosen people," which will be a "light unto the nations." The example that Jewish law seeks to set is one aimed not at individuals but specifically at other "nations." The institutions of solidarity that mark off Jews' commitments to one another from their more minimal obligations to outsiders are not designed to be applied as universal law governing rela-

tions among all people, but rather to be reiterated within each particular nation. This, then, is the universalist mission of Judaism: not to be "a light to all individuals," . . . , but *rather to teach specific nations how to live as nations.*[50]

## THE INDIVIDUAL: A MODERN MYSTIFICATION

So: The church as what I am calling a culture is a manner and mode of church that is, as George Lindbeck says, "more Jewish than anything else. . . . It is above all by the character of its communal life that it witnesses, that it proclaims the gospel and serves the world." And such is why "An invisible church is as biblically odd as an invisible Israel."[51] Biblical narrative logic simply demands a specific, visible people, a society or societal remnant, a *polis.*

I realize all this will strike many readers as exceedingly strange. I too, after all, have been reared and shaped in late modernity, taught to conceive of persons and Christianity in liberal, individualistic terms. So I understand that what I am calling for is an arduous retraining of the imagination, the learning and practice of a new grammar or logic. But perhaps it will ease the difficulty to remember that much of this grammar is new only to us. In historical perspective, it is our individuated, isolated self that is exceedingly strange.

As rhetorician Wayne Booth notes, the self as "in-dividual" (literally "un-divided one") is barely more than two centuries old. The in-dividual was invented by a succession of Enlightenment thinkers and became, in its most extreme but perhaps also its most widespread interpretations, a view of the self as "a single atomic isolate, bounded by the skin, its chief value residing precisely in some core of in-dividuality, of difference." Thus it remains popular—almost second nature—to think we get at our "true self" by peeling away social ties like the skin of an onion. The "real me" is not my membership in the worldwide church, my shared kin with Clapps around the country, not my connection—with three million other people—to the geography and culture of Chicago. The "real me" is my unique, in-dividual, core self. The in-dividual self values itself most for what is supposedly utterly different and unconnected about it. But, objects Booth, such an understanding of self is incoherent. Can we really believe that we are not, to the core, who we are because of our kin, our occupations, our political and social situations, our faith or philosophical associations, our friendships? And if our "true self" is whatever stands apart from those around us and is altogether

unique about us, most of us are in trouble. The bizarre modern, liberal notion of the self means that even the greatest geniuses have only minimal worth. "Goethe," says Booth, "was fond of saying that only about 2 percent of his thought was original."[52] Truly, as Philip Slater remarks, "The notion that people begin as separate individuals, who then march out and connect themselves with others, is one of the most dazzling bits of self-mystification in the history of the species."[53]

In fact, Booth continues, "People in all previous cultures were not seen as *essentially* independent, isolated units with totally independent values; rather, they were mysteriously complex persons overlapping with other persons in ways that made it legitimate to enforce certain kinds of responsibility to the community." In these settings, persons were not "'individuals' at all but overlapping members one of another. Anyone in those cultures thinking words like 'I' and 'mine' thought them as inescapably loaded with plurality: 'I' could not even think of 'my' self as separated from my multiple affiliations: my family, my tribe, my city-state, my feudal domain, my people."[54]

Are the biblical cultures part of the "previous cultures" Booth here remarks on? Scholars have again and again noted the Hebrew conception of "corporate personality," the understanding that families, cities, tribes, and nations possess distinctive personalities and that individuals derive identity from and so might represent these social bodies.[55] We need no new frame when we extend this picture. Writing on the concept of personhood in New Testament times, Bruce J. Malina notes, "the first-century Mediterranean person did not share or comprehend our idea of an 'individual' at all." Rather, "our first-century person would perceive himself as a distinctive whole *set in relation* to other such wholes and *set within* a given social and natural background."[56]

So when Paul spoke of the church as a "body," he borrowed the metaphor from a fable widely used in several cultures of antiquity. Just as "Israel" could serve as the name either of an individual (Jacob) or a community (the nation), so could Paul use "Christ" to refer to an individual (Jesus of Nazareth) or a community (the church). In the words of New Testament scholar Charles Talbert, "'Members' . . . is Paul's term for the parts of the body through which the life of the body is expressed (cf. 1 Cor 12:12, 14–26; Rom 6:13). Paul is saying then that individual Christians in their corporeal existence are the various body parts of the corporate personality of Christ through which the life of Christ is expressed."[57]

It is no simple matter to "translate" ancient understandings of self (or anything else) into our later, quite different setting. Yet I think this is

another task that is made more feasible by our post-Constantinian, post-modern setting. As Booth comments, the in-dividuated self has been criticized from its beginning, and "it has been torn to pieces and stomped on by almost every major thinker in this century."[58] Furthermore, freed from its distorting Constantinian "responsibility," the church no longer must support a view of the self as in-dividuated and able to determine the good apart from all "accidental" ties of history or community. We can reaffirm that, just as there can be no individual Americans apart from the nation America, so can there be no Christians apart from the church. We can be like the apostle Peter, who "did not learn God's will by Socratic questioning and rational reflection, but as the member of a group who had been with Jesus 'from the beginning in Galilee.'"[59] We can be like the early followers of Christ the Way, who trained fresh imaginations and became a new humanity by devoting themselves "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). After Constantine, on the other side of modernity, we can regard and embrace the church as a way of life.


# NOTES

1. Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 12. It is now, in fact, debated whether or not Constantine was genuinely a Christian. Some suggest he simply used Christianity as an ideological support for a regime that was in many ways anti-Christian. For a summary of this debate, see Philip LeMasters, *The Import of Eschatology in John Howard Yoder's Critique of Constantinianism* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992), pp. 102–7.

2. John Howard Yoder, "The Otherness of the Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35 (October 1961):212. This seminal essay of Yoder's is now happily more accessibly found in his *The Royal Priesthood*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 53–64. Much of the account to follow leans heavily on Yoder. For another, basically congruent account, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991). Besides providing historical detail throughout, Bosch observes that "the Roman Catholic (or Western) Church was always compromised to the state. The same was true of the Byzantine Church, only more so" (p. 205). He also notes that the Reformers (excepting Anabaptists) did not break with the medieval understanding of church and state: "Since Constantine the idea of a 'Christian' state . . . was simply taken for granted" (p. 240).

3. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, p. 211.

4. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation and The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 302.

5. John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1977), pp. 72–73.

6. Yoder, "Otherness," p. 288.

7. Ibid., p. 289.

8. Ibid.

9. John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 138.

10. John Milbank begins his magisterial *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) with the words, "Once, there was no 'secular'" (p. 9). He then uses much of his first chapter to provide an account of how the church in fact created the conceptuality and institutions of secularism, with more sympathy for the synthesis of Christendom than Yoder's account allows. But Milbank sees changes that, by the time of the late medieval and then Reformation periods, issue in the sorts of developments Yoder deplores. Thus Milbank laments the "self-understanding of Christianity arrived at in late-medieval nominalism, the protestant reformation and seventeenth-century Augustinianism, which completely privatized, spiritualized and transcendentalized the sacred, and concurrently reimagined nature, human action and society as a sphere of autonomous, sheerly formal power" (p. 9).

11. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951), pp. 2–3.

12. Obviously I borrow this essay's title from John Howard Yoder's influential work, *The Politics of Jesus,* 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994). Yoder was one of the first theologians to crystallize the political aspects of Jesus' life and ministry, and push their implications. In this chapter I will largely rely on more recent New Testament scholarship, particularly that of N. T. Wright and Ben F. Meyer. But it is important to emphasize that what follows is, in broad strokes, hardly an account put forward by a mere handful of theologians and biblical scholars. As Yoder makes clear, his 1972 book (the first edition of *Politics*) was "*then* a summary of the widely known scholarship of the time." Yoder especially made use of the work of Amos Wilder, Oscar Cullmann, Otto Piper, Paul Minear, and Markus Barth. In his revised edition, Yoder correctly notes that, in the intervening decades since his book was first published, scholars now "less than ever . . . make Jesus apolitical." (Yoder, pp. vii, x, 13–14.) The list of active biblical scholars alone, which Yoder might cite as vivid proof but does not, includes, in New Testament studies, John Riches, Gerd Thiessen, Wayne Meeks, William Herzog, Gerhard Lohfink, Ched Myers, Walter Wink, Marcus Borg, Richard Hays, E. P. Sanders, and Richard Horsley; and in Old Testament studies, Walter Brueggemann, Paul Hanson, Christopher J. H. Wright, Patrick Miller, and Norman Gottwald. For a helpful overview of some of the studies especially concerning politics and Jesus, see Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 16–17, 100–102, 116–18, and especially 151–60.

13. N. T. Wright, "The New Testament and the 'State,'" *Themelios* 16, no. 1 (October/November 1990):11.

14. See Ben F. Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self-Discovery* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazer, 1986), p. 61.

15. Roman occupation was "simply the mode that Israel's continuing exile had taken. . . . As long as Herod and Pilate were in control of Palestine, Israel was still under the curse of Deuteronomy 29." N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 141. See also his *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 268–72.

16. For a helpful survey of these options as theological and political, see Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus.* Meyer comments that much theology (I would note pietistic evangelicalism and existentialist neo-orthodoxy) has misconceived the career of Jesus "as an individualistic call to decision, in almost complete abstraction from its Jewishness and from the intra-Jewish historical context of religious competitor's for Israel's allegiance (Pharisees, Zealots, Sadducees, Essenes, baptists. . . .)" (*Early Christians,* pp. 43–44).

17. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God,* p. 169.

18. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches,* vol. 1, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 40.

19. All quotations from Wright in this paragraph are from *The New Testament and the People of God,* pp. 169–70.

20. Yoder, *Politics,* p. 28.

21. Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 74.

22. Charles P. Price and Louis Weil, *Liturgy for Living* (New York: Seabury, 1979), p. 21; Yoder, *Politics,* pp. 206–07.

23. Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 34.

24. Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 45.

25. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God,* p. 120.

26. Ibid., p. 350.

27. See John H. Westerhoff, "Fashioning Christians in Our Day," in *Schooling Christians,* ed. Stanley Hauerwas and John H. Westerhoff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 280. Cf. Wright: "The Christians, meanwhile, do not seem to have taken refuge in the defence that they were merely a private club for the advancement of personal piety. They continued to proclaim their allegiance to a Christ who was a 'king' in a sense which precluded allegiance to Caesar, even if his kingdom was not to be conceived on the model of Caesar's" (*New Testament and the People of God,* p. 355).

28. Meeks, *Origins,* p. 110. So far was early Christianity removed from its later liberal, individualistic incarnation that the eminent historian of antiquity Peter Brown comments that its appeal "lay in its radical sense of community" (*The World of Late Antiquity: A.D. 150–750* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971], p. 68). In another place he observes that the church was concerned to create a "society in miniature, a 'people of God'; its appeal lay in its

exceptional degree of cohesion" (*Religion and Society in the Age of St. Augustine* [New York: Harper and Row, 1972], p. 136).

29. Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 5.

30. Ibid., p. 7.

31. Ibid., p. 47.

32. For a fuller account on this point, see my *Families at the Crossroads* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 9–26 and 174–79.

33. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 164.

34. Meyer, *Early Christians,* p. 46.

35. Ibid., p. 47.

36. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God,* pp. 247–48. Elsewhere Wright remarks that Jewish theology was a "fighting doctrine." In the same vein, for the early church, "The major issues at stake . . . were monotheism, idolatry, election, holiness and how these interacted. And if that list sounds abstract, removed from the actual life-setting of actual churches, it is because we have forgotten, or have not yet learned . . . that precisely these 'theological' issues functioned as shorthand ways of articulating the points of pressure, tension and conflict between different actual communities, specifically, Jews and pagans" (*Climax of the Covenant,* pp. 125, 122).

37. Meyer: "Neither the primitive Christian proclaimer nor the point and function of his proclamation is intelligible in historical terms apart from this biblical and ecclesial legacy" (*Early Christians,* p. 47).

38. Ibid., p. 38–39.

39. Ibid., p. 65.

40. See E. J. Tinsley, *The Imitation of God in Christ* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 177. As Tinsley eloquently puts it on the same page, Jesus was not simply "a copyist, but a creative artist, in relation to his nation's history."

41. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God,* p. 225, n. 29. I have added Hollywood to Wright's list.

42. See Meyer, *Early Christians,* pp. 60–61.

43. Ibid., p. 64. See also Wright, *New Testament and the People of God,* pp. 306–7.

44. God "sees that the only way of rescuing his world is to call a people, and to enter into a covenant with them, so that through them he will deal with evil. But the means of dealing with evil is to concentrate it in one place and condemn—execute—it there. The full force of this condemnation is not intended to fall on this people in general, but on their representative, the Messiah" (Wright, *Climax of the Covenant,* p. 239).

45. Ibid., p. 151.

46. On the significance of resurrection, see Wright, *New Testament and the People of God,* pp. 328–34.

47. Meyer, *Early Christians,* p. 96. See also Wright, *New Testament and the People of God,* pp. 93, 96; *Climax of the Covenant,* pp. 150–51. The church

as "new Israel" does not nullify God's election of "old Israel" and those within it who do not now believe in Jesus. I take this to be one of the main points of Paul's difficult argument in Rom 9–11. Put in terms applicable today, the existence of the church does not mean present-day Jews are no longer God's chosen people. God has not forgotten, and will never forget, this "Israel."

48. Meyer, *Early Christians,* p. 43.

49. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 388 (emphasis in original). Compare E. J. Tinsley: "The life of the Christian is the life of itinerant Israel over again, with the same trials and temptations (1 Cor 10:5–13), but the Christian now knows that what was being rehearsed in a preliminary way in the history of Israel was the life of Christ with his faithful followers. Because in Christ the Christians are the New Israel, their life is bound to be a series of variations on the theme of the 'Way' of the Old Israel as it has been summed up for them in Christ" (*Imitation,* p. 157).

50. Gordon Lafer, "Universalism and Particularism in Jewish Law," ed. David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz, *Jewish Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 196 (emphasis added). Lafer's point is quite explicit in Jer 12:15–16: "And after I [God] have plucked them [the nations] up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again to their heritage and to their land, every one of them. And then if they will diligently learn the ways of my people [i.e., the culture of Israel], to swear by my name, 'As the Lord lives,' as they taught my people to swear by Baal, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people."

51. See "The Church," in Geoffrey Wainwright, ed., *Keeping the Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 193 and 183. I am indebted to Inagrace Dietterich for calling my attention to Lindbeck's extraordinary essay.

52. Booth, "Individualism and the Mystery of the Social Self," in *Freedom and Interpretation,* ed. Barbara Johnson (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 81, 87–88.

53. Quoted from Slater's *"The Earth Walk without Further Attribution,"* in Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 325.

54. Booth, "Individualism," pp. 78 and 79.

55. For a classic statement, see H. Wheeler Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," in *The People and the Book,* ed. A. S. Peake (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), pp. 353–82. Robinson remarks that such doctrines as Original Sin are incomprehensible without a notion such as corporate personality. I would add that our thoroughgoing individualism also threatens to render incoherent the doctrines of atonement, of the church, and even, most fundamentally, the Trinity.

56. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1981), pp. 54 and 55 (emphasis in original).

57. Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 31. Con-

fer J. Paul Sampley: "Paul thinks of believers' relationship with Christ in terms of solidarity with, participation in, or belonging to Christ. . . . Those who have faith are one together in Christ. This solidarity with Christ is Paul's primary identification of believers." And: "Just as surely as one does not snub the workings of the Spirit, one does not disregard the community in one's life of faith." And: "Paul's great interest in the health and growth of the individual's faith is always set within his concern for the well-being of the community, and his commitment to community is always located within his conviction that God's renewal of the entire cosmos is under way." See his *Walking between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 12, 43, 118.

58. Booth, "Individualism," p. 79.
59. Meeks, *Origins,* p. 6.