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## THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE: SEVEN REVOLUTIONS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

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### OVERVIEW

*Seven Revolutions: How Christianity Changed the World and Can Change It Again* by Mike Aquilina and James L. Papandrea (New York: Image, 2015), 278 pp.

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### I. The Church of the Future Can Learn from the Church of the Past

#### A. Case Study: The Martyrdom of Polycarp

1. The bishop was led into the stadium, where death and gore were entertainment, and where the crowd was hoping to drown the harsh realities of life, and the fear of their own mortality, in someone else's blood. Three days earlier, Bishop Polycarp had dreamed that his pillow was on fire. He knew that meant soon he was going to face the flames. Now, as he entered the arena in chains, surrounded by those who hated the faith that he stood for, he heard the voice of God encouraging him, telling him to be strong and courageous. When the crowd saw him and recognized him as the leader of the Christians in their city, they cheered to see that he had been arrested.
2. Polycarp stood before the Roman proconsul, the man whom the emperor had sent to be the governor of the province. When asked, Polycarp confirmed that he was indeed the bishop of the city of Smyrna. This was as good as an admission of guilt. Being a Christian was not only illegal; it was considered an antisocial, even treasonous, crime—and, therefore, it was a crime worthy of death.
3. The proconsul attempted to convince Polycarp to deny his faith to save his life. "You're an old man," he pleaded, implying that the ordeal Polycarp faced would be all the more harsh because of his age. "All you have to do is take an oath to the emperor . . . and renounce your fellow traitors." Because Christians worshipped only one God, instead of the many gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon, the non-Christians took to calling Christians "atheists." The proconsul promised Polycarp that he would go free if he would only deny his faith and his Christian

community by saying, “Away with the atheists.” In response, the bishop of Smyrna turned to the pagan crowd, pointed to them, and said, “Away with the atheists!”

4. Angered, but wishing to make an apostate rather than a martyr, the Roman proconsul pressed again, “Swear the oath, and I will release you. . . . Curse Christ!” But Polycarp calmly replied, “I have been his servant for eighty-six years, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King, who saved me?” As the proconsul continued to rail at the bishop, Polycarp went on, “If you think that I will do as you request and swear an oath to Caesar, pretending not to know who I am, then listen carefully: I am a Christian. Now if you want to learn the teachings of Christianity, set a day and give me a hearing.”
5. Eventually, the proconsul took a different tack. He threatened that wild animals would tear Polycarp apart while the spectators cheered. But the bishop responded, “Call for them. To change one’s mind from evil to righteousness is a good thing, but to go from better to worse is something we cannot do.” The proconsul responded, “If you’re not afraid of the wild beasts, I will have you burned with fire, unless you change your mind.” Polycarp replied, “You threaten me with a fire that burns for only a little while and then is put out. But you know nothing of the eternal fire, the eternal punishment that awaits the ungodly at the coming judgment. Why do you hesitate? Come on, do what you will!”
6. Members of the crowd eagerly helped gather wood for the fire, and as the bishop prayed, the fire was lit. Although the flames surrounded him, the saintly bishop’s body was not consumed. Finally a soldier was ordered to kill him with a dagger. The wound produced so much blood that the crowd looked on in amazement as Polycarp’s blood put out the fire. But the bishop was dead. The fire was lit once again, and Polycarp’s body was burned to prevent its veneration. But the faithful of Smyrna were able to retrieve his bones, which were treated as holy relics.

#### B. Christianity in the World: An Agent of Transformation

1. What kind of culture encourages people to cheer at the death of an elderly man who is guilty of no other crime than being a Christian bishop? And how did humanity progress from the Roman culture of Polycarp’s time to the kind of people we are now, feeling surprise, horror, and disgust with such martyr stories? What changed in human society to make us what we are today? And is there evidence that we as a culture could be slipping back to where we once were?
2. *Seven Revolutions* by Aquilina and Papandrea describes seven cultural transformations that changed human society for the better. These revolutions were the direct result of the presence of Christianity in the world during the first few centuries after Christ, and of the influence of his church on society.
3. In a time when it has become fashionable to cheer the misfortunes of the church, and to highlight her failures as if they overshadow its faithfulness, it is important to remember the ways in which Christianity has made the world a better place, and to demonstrate that these

contributions far outweigh the times when a few leaders of the church have failed in their mission. The truth is, the best of human society—with its improved quality of life, and its protection of human rights—is the result of these seven cultural revolutions that came about because of the Christian church. Specifically, they radically changed the way human society thought of the individual, the family, work, religion, community, attitudes toward life and death, and even government.

C. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Call to Be Countercultural

1. The authors contend that these seven revolutions “were both a response to the gospel, and a rejection of the cultural values that were in conflict with the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. **The early church was nothing if not countercultural**, to the extent that even slaves and former slaves could become bishops.” Human relationships changed dramatically because of the gospel, in ever widening concentric circles, beginning with the individual and extending outward to the world.
2. Gone are the days when it is fashionable, or even acceptable, to be a Christian, they argue. In spite of the fact that a majority of people in First World countries self-identify as Christian, many of these self-proclaimed Christians are **joining in the church bashing**. But those who embrace the values of their faith in a world where doing so is frowned upon are the ones who in the end will witness by their example. “And people will see that they are willing to risk the comforts of conformity for the sake of something bigger—a life bigger than life—the kingdom of God,” they argue.

II. **A Revolution of the Person: The Invention of Human Dignity**

- A. The first revolution is concerned with human dignity. Unwanted lives in the Roman Empire—be they children, slaves, or the handicapped—were thrown away at will, and no one thought much of it. It was the first Christians who condemned this behavior and openly spoke out against abortion, child exposure, disposal of the handicapped, mistreatment of slaves, gladiatorial violence, and the overall low view of “inconvenient” persons.
- B. A revolution of individual worth affirmed that all people were created equal, made as they were in the image of God, and no one was expendable. But this principle “would have struck aristocrats as revolutionary and dangerous” in the first century. The idea of equality was not self-evident, even in Greek democracy where the strong did as they wished, and the weak suffered what they deserved.
- C. In the Roman Empire, “Citizens were a privileged minority. Saint Paul was one of them, and more than once he used his Roman citizenship to good effect.” The idea of equal rights, the dignity of victims, and an all-inclusive society, they argued, came from Jesus Christ and was propagated by his followers. “All who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).
- D. Consequently, the church revolutionized the way society defined personhood. To affirm the universal dignity of human life required the strong

to speak up on behalf of the weak (i.e., those who couldn't speak for themselves. For example, one Roman writer said that as long as they could not talk, babies were more like vegetables than human beings. Yet from the very beginning, the church affirmed the value of all human life, resisting policies allowing for exploitation and dehumanization. Because of the early Christians, this new way of looking at humanity became so much a part of Western culture that eventually the Constitution of the United States would be built around the concept that all people are created equal (though admittedly this stipulation would not be fully realized until much later after the country's founding).

### III. A Revolution in the Home: The New Idea of Family

- A. The second revolution, which builds on the first, concerns the family. In contrast to Roman culture, Christian homes had husbands and wives who loved each other, and children who were valued and cared for. Marriage was not just a contract but a covenant, and the wife was not merely the property of the husband. (She was, but he was her property now, too!)
- B. Sex was seen in a new light as well—not just something for the physical pleasure of the husband, but a sacred activity for both husband and wife to enjoy in the context of a monogamous relationship. As one second century author wrote of the early Christians:

“They marry like everyone else, and have children, but they do not expose their offspring. They share their food but not their wives. They are ‘in the flesh,’ but do not live ‘according to the flesh.’ They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven.” (*Epistle of Diognetus*)

- C. In short, the foundational value of personhood was applied now to women and children. Moreover, with the growth development of the church, the exploitation of all those who lacked support systems was critiqued and rejected by believers. This revolution affirmed the home as a place of safety and love, where women and children were to be treasured not oppressed.

### IV. A Revolution of Work: How Labor Became Holy

- A. The third revolution involved the realm of work, showing how labor eventually came to be seen as holy. This major transformation affirmed that people were not property, that they should be free to choose their own work, and that they must be given a certain amount of free time for worship, cultural creation (e.g., artistic expression), and the enjoyment of loved ones. It was a further application of the first revolution (human dignity).
- B. Rome's mentality, however, was: “Shoemakers, cleaners, weavers—these were the people who called themselves Christians. How could a religion made up of such lowly people be anything but contemptible?” Indeed, manual labor was despicable to the upper classes in the ancient world, and that type of work was seen as best left to slaves. Aristotle famously wrote, “There are two classes of persons, and the one are as far inferior to the other as the body to the soul or a beast to a man—and this is the condition of all whose function is mere physical service and who are incapable of anything better—these persons are natural slaves.”

- C. Christians, however, taught that work was good, whether it is manual labor or otherwise. God himself worked with his “hands” in creating the world, and Jesus was a craftsman before his public ministry began. As Paul wrote, “We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow” (2 Thessalonians 3:7b-9).

## V. A Revolution of Religion: God Is Love

- A. The fourth revolution involved religion itself. Whereas the pagan religions of the past were seen as contracts between the patrons (i.e., the gods) and the people, and were seen as a patriotic duty holding the empire together, Christianity focused on people having an actual relationship with the living God and like-minded fellow believers.
- B. The early Christians, rather than trying to guess what made the pantheon of gods happy by way of ritual and sacrifice, believed that they had received divine revelation showing them the final sacrifice had already been made by Jesus on the cross, and that people could have a direct and intimate knowledge of God firsthand. Indeed, God had always been *for* his people not *against* them. As the Apostle John wrote (more than once), “God is love.”
- C. The idea of monotheistic/trinitarian God was radical. God is one, yet he is three persons in a divine relationship of love, with his love spilling over into humanity, causing Christians not only to love God but to love people as well. Moreover, such a freely given divine love informed Christian morality and served as the motivation for virtue. Believers sought to live a life that pleased God—not to earn salvation, but to gratefully live out the salvation they had already received by grace in the risen Christ.

## VI. A Revolution of Community: Love Your Neighbor

- A. The fifth revolution involved community, driven by Christ’s command to love one’s neighbor as he loved himself. The fuller quote from the *Epistle to Diognetus* captures the essence of this revolution:
 

“They [the Christians] share their food but not their wives. They are ‘in the flesh,’ but do not live ‘according to the flesh.’ They live on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws; indeed, in their private lives they transcend the laws. They love everyone, and by everyone they are persecuted. They are unknown, yet they are condemned; they are put to death, yet they are brought to life. They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in need of everything, yet they abound in everything. They are dishonored, yet they are glorified in their dishonor; they are slandered, yet they are vindicated. They are cursed, yet they bless; they are insulted, yet they offer respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when they are punished, they rejoice as though brought to life. . . . Those who hate them are unable to give a reason for their hostility.”

- B. The early Christians understood that their call was to join God in his mission of extending his radical love to others, even at great cost to themselves. This mission involved working with the poor both *in sincerity* and *for the benefit of those needing assistance*. Notable was the contrast between Christian charity (loving others for the sake of love) and pagan charity (doing good for others in order to be seen by others as doing good). Christians were not to build up treasure in this world but in heaven. As they said (and sought to demonstrate), “The storehouses of heaven are the stomachs of the hungry.”

## VII. A Revolution in Death: The Conquest of the Last Enemy

- A. The sixth revolution involved how people came to see death in light of the Christian gospel. This revolution is especially noteworthy since the pagan world of the first century had very little hope when it came to death. One philosopher wrote, bluntly, “Those who have died are without hope.” Indeed, inscriptions on tombs and references in literature indicated that many first-century pagans viewed death with horror. People died and went to a murky, disembodied existence called “the shades.” Once there, they would sit and bewail their existence—if they had any existence at all.
- B. The final word of Greek and Roman philosophers when it came to death was grim resignation and a stoic attempt to stare death in the face with a stiff upper lip. There was nothing much to look forward to beyond the grave. Consequently, some people shrieked at death while others shrugged. One man’s epitaph declared, “I was not. I became. I am not. I care not.”
- C. One dynamic in the first century that convinced many Gentiles of the truth of Christianity was how Christians faced death. One pagan wrote to another pagan about the believers in his period: “If any among them passes from this world they rejoice and offer thanks to God. They escort the body as if it were setting out from one place to another.”
- D. The Christians, of course, got this notion from the resurrected Christ—and the apostles who faithfully carried on this central doctrine of the Christian faith. “Because I live, you also will live,” said Jesus. Because of Easter, death had no more sting, and the horrors of death were seen as nothing more than a temporary sadness. A new body and a new, eternal life awaited those who belonged to Christ by faith.

## VIII. A Revolution of the State: Religious Freedom

- A. Finally, a revolution in government promoted the ideal that rulers should serve those whom they rule, not the other way around. Moreover, all people should enjoy freedom of religion. In this regard, the influence of Constantine and his edict of religious tolerance is historically significant.
- B. By the time the church was in a position to influence government in the fourth century, a Christian view of good government was emerging. It taught that those who governed should be the protectors of those they govern. Leadership was not a right; it was a responsibility, one that included serving the “least of these” in society. To govern was to be entrusted with something valuable—human beings created in the image of God, and the resources to

sustain them. In other words, leadership from a Christian perspective was a form of stewardship.

- C. The theory was a good one, though the church struggled to implement its high ideals about governance for the next thousand years. Much would need to be corrected during the Protestant Reformation and beyond.

## IX. Concluding Thoughts

- A. Aquilina and Papandrea argue that Christians can influence the world for good again in our day, but it will mean **making a commitment to stand by a worldview that society often rejects and ridicules**. It will mean making a commitment to accept a countercultural posture in society, even while many who call themselves Christian simply allow themselves to be converted by the culture. It will mean waking up to the reality of cultural persecution (as well as the violent persecution still going on in many countries) and resisting that persecution.
- B. This cultural persecution may be subtle, and it may take the form of pressure from areas as diverse as the marketing media, with its temptations toward materialism, and education, with its skepticism about anything spiritual or miraculous. Christians will need to recognize these challenges to traditional faith, call them out, and resist them. We will also need to support one another when we do this, speaking up for our brothers and sisters when they are ridiculed.
- C. In these ways, the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can overcome the new paganism the way the early church did, by refusing to deny the faith and by being willing to risk our lives (or the comfort of our lifestyles) for something bigger than life. In short, the church's "To-Do List" in our day is as follows:
  - 1. Reject isolationism.
  - 2. Respect the value of every human life.
  - 3. Reject the culture of celebrity and humiliation as entertainment.
  - 4. Respect the humble, the laborer, and the poor.
  - 5. Reject the creation of a secular religion by the state.
  - 6. Respect religious freedom.
  - 7. Reject a defeatist attitude.
  - 8. Respect your neighbors.