

A Different Way of Growing Churches

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What did the early Christians actually do?

In *Evangelism in the Early Church*,^[1] Michael Green declares 'A priority of the early Christians seems to have been to have personal conversations with individuals.' But Green's emphasis on every Christian being a personal evangelist got it wrong.

That is the claim of Alan Kreider's recent investigation into the church of the first few centuries, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*.^[2] In fact, the teaching given to Christians in those early days after the apostolic period contains no instruction in, or pressure to do, what we call personal evangelism. It seems that Green was assuming twentieth century evangelistic methods and trying to find a rationale for them which simply wasn't there. In the NT there is no constraint put on ordinary believers to buttonhole their neighbours and confront them with the claims of Christ. Rather what we find is that Christians are to 'make the most of every opportunity' when their stand-out lives provoke questions from people (Col 4:5-6; 1 Pet 3:15). It is a responsive witness, not an aggressive one.

This also looks much more like what Kreider finds in the writings of early fathers like Justin, Tertullian and Cyprian and what has been discovered of ancient catechisms.

The church during those years not only withstood empire-wide persecution but grew remarkably. How did it grow? We need to ask that question. As we see the current state of the churches in the West, we must have wondered at some point whether we have been missing something vital—something which builds better churches in the long run.

I do not think that we should swallow what Kreider has to say uncritically. But it is worth pondering what he has found in his investigation of the sources.

Four basic elements

According to Kreider the early church grew through a combination of four things, all of which are counter-cultural, to a greater or lesser extent, to current mainstream evangelicalism. These were:

- *Patience*—this virtue was centrally important to the early churches and early Christians. The first attribute of love, according to Paul, is that it is patient (1 Cor 13:4). Whatever the circumstances, patience reigned.
- *'Habitus'*—habitual behaviour. They took seriously that it was behaviour that spoke truly about what they believed. 'We do not speak great things, but we live them,' said Cyprian.^[3] A 'Sermon on the Mount' patient generosity was to be the Christian's default setting even under persecution.
- *Catechesis and worship*—the churches committed to forming these habits of behaviour in their members. A thorough catechesis, which majored on a changed life rather than simply the acceptance of certain doctrines, was the way habits were nurtured. Deep engagement with God in worship provided the motivation in maintaining that changed life.
- *Ferment*—they relied not on Christian activism, but on God's invisible power to fulfil his plans, which was seen as not susceptible to human control. Kreider chooses the metaphor of fermentation because, though it is a relentless process, it is both unseen and not in a hurry. The churches were grown by the life of the Spirit not by thrusting evangelistic strategies.

These elements of church life don't look very much like the exhortations we receive in our churches today. This should make us curious. It was the *habitus* of patient endurance that made Christianity both deeply disturbing and yet attractive to outsiders amid the turmoil, paganism and hurly burly of the first century.

Character formation

Instead of making it as easy as possible to become members of the church, it was emphasized that to become a Christian meant committing oneself to a deep change of life. A course of catechesis before baptism and joining the church could take up to three years.

How does patient endurance move from the realm of ideas (and a congregation nodding its head in agreement with the preacher) to the embodied world of behaviour (and a congregation living it out)? Kreider tells us that the *habitus* of individual Christians was shaped in four different but interconnected ways.

First, there was the commitment of the catechist to his pupils. The catechist acted not simply as a teacher but as a role model. Here Kreider tells the moving story of Saturus, whose people were in prison. He came by his own choice to be with his catechumens and eventually to suffer death with them. He was with them to strengthen them and set an example to them right to the end.

Secondly, there was the routine of repeating certain actions and phrases. Daily telling oneself 'I am a Christian' was encouraged. In recent years our generation has rightly grasped the idea of 'preaching the gospel to oneself', regularly recollecting God's grace towards us. The act of 'crossing yourself' was originally not so much a superstition as another way of reminding yourself of your true identity.

Thirdly, Christians were taught that they would suffer, and they prepared themselves for events that would test their resilience to breaking point by prayer and fasting together.

Fourthly, their worship shaped the Christians' *habitus* by giving them behavioural as well as verbal habits. They ate together—the fellowship meal and Lord's Supper were central. Not only so, but the kiss of peace was 'one of the most prevalent features of early Christianity'.^[4]

Baptism

This long preparation before baptism and admission to the church appears to be greatly at odds with what we find in Acts.

The answer to this, according to Kreider, is that the examples of baptism we meet in the NT are generally of people with a Jewish or at least a synagogue connection.

From their background in understanding the OT those asking for baptism would have known that to be baptized meant a very definite commitment to a godly life. 'Judaism was the catechumenate of the primitive church'.^[5]

But here we should be careful. Since the NT sees conversion and baptism as very closely tied to each other, this kind of approach could easily lead us into the errors of 'preparationism' and legalism—that people should not be invited to become Christians until they have attained a certain standard of behaviour. This vitiates the sheer grace of God in the gospel.

However, this does not preclude us from considering being much more careful and intensive in our follow-up courses for those we recognise as new Christians. Our instruction should be far more intentional and practical in bringing about changed behaviour. Perhaps we should not move on to the next lesson in the course until real and measurable life changes are seen from the previous lesson?

Pagan life

The priority given to Christ-like behaviour, not just belief, would have stood out markedly from the life of the pagan world of the Roman Empire.

Justin wrote his *First Apology* in Rome around 150 AD. Kreider explains: 'Justin sees Roman life as a *habitus* of un-freedom, characterised by addictive practises in four areas: sexual ethics marred by fornication; the occult trapped by the magic arts; wealth and possessions distorted by competitive acquisitiveness; and violence and xenophobia filled with hatred and murder towards people of different tribes and customs'.^[6]

They are immensely hard to unlearn. Christians may struggle. But Christians have been liberated from the old *habitus* in order to enter into a new *habitus*, a new normality. This applies in each of the four areas: in sex, continence; in place of magic, dedication to God; in wealth, bringing what we have into a common fund for sharing with people in need; in violence and xenophobia, living together and praying for enemies. This new *habitus*, Justin contends is rooted in the teachings of Jesus, whose word was the power of God.

It would be a good exercise to think through the *habitus* of the 21st century West and to compare and contrast with that of ancient Rome.

Witness

Why did the early Christian church grow?

Kreider writes:

It grew because Christians behaved in ways that were distinctive and suggested novel approaches to thorny problems. It grew because the patience Christians exhibited was counterintuitively creative. But it was not easy to prepare people in the Greco-Roman world to live this way. Christians in various parts of the empire developed programs of catechesis to ready candidates for membership. Their distinctive, embodied character attracted new people to the faith. Christian catechetical approaches were unrivalled in the ancient world and powerfully shaped the churches' witness.^[7]

There are various, in many ways excellent, Bible study guides which are used these days by churches. But perhaps Kreider's book directs us to look again at these kinds of resources and to ask ourselves whether these need to be re-imagined and rewritten to be much more like the programs of the early churches.

What went wrong?

Kreider basically lays the blame at the feet of the emperor Constantine. Legitimizing Christianity across the Roman empire he did not feel able to take on the Christian *habitus* himself because his political position and the kinds of decisions he had to make, he felt, precluded it. He was not catechized and baptized until just before his death in 337 AD.

There is much more that could be said, but this set a precedent which soon brought about the demise of this more robust approach to producing Christians of patient endurance which grew the churches.

[1] Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1970).

[2] Alan Krieger, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker Academic, 2016).

[3] Krieger, *Patient Ferment*, 296.

[4] Krieger, *Patient Ferment*, 51.

[5] Krieger, *Patient Ferment*, 176.

[6] Krieger, *Patient Ferment*, 143.

[7] Krieger, *Patient Ferment*, 185.