

# What we can learn from the Early Church about Ecclesiology

*In his little book Sign of the Kingdom (Eerdmans, 1980), Lesslie Newbigin offers this account of the transformations of the church from the earliest centuries to the present day (pages 46 to 49).*

When the Christian Church was first launched into the life of the eastern Roman Empire it found itself surrounded by many religious societies which claimed to offer personal salvation to their members through a variety of teaching and disciplines. Several Greek words were in use to describe such societies (*thiasos*, *heranos*, etc.). As private religious societies they enjoyed the protection of the state. If the Christian Church had seen itself in this way it would have been content to use these names and could have availed itself of this protection. But, although (for example) critics like Celsus described the Church in this way, these words were never used by the Church to describe itself. Of the two words used in the Septuagint [the Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures] to translate the Hebrew names for the whole congregation of Israel, the word *synagogos*, already used by the Jewish diaspora, was avoided and the word *ecclesia* was almost universally adopted – the word which in normal secular use referred to the public assembly of all the citizens gathered to discuss and settle the public affairs of the city. In other words, the early Church did not see itself as a private religious society competing with others to offer personal salvation to its members; it saw itself as a movement launched into the public life of the world, challenging the *cultus publicus* of the Empire, claiming the allegiance of all without exception.

This universal claim was being made by communities which were – from the point of view of *realpolitik* – insignificant. When one remembers what these communities were in relation to the society of the time, there is something staggering about the words that Paul uses. In the Letter to the Colossians, after speaking of Christ as the cosmic head of all creation, he continues without any break to speak of him as ‘the head of the body, the Church’. In the very similar passage of Ephesians we read that God has put all things under the feet of Christ ‘and made him the head over all things for the church which is his body’ (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22f). The claim for universal sovereignty is made in the face of the overwhelming powers that rule the world and the Church is identified as the body whose head is this cosmic sovereign. The Church was on a collision course with the established powers, and for three centuries paid the price for this stupendous claim.

Then came the event which the Seer of Patmos could not have anticipated – the conversion and baptism of the Emperor. It is fashionable to the present time to speak of this as a disaster for the Church. In our present historical situation, when we struggle to free ourselves from the clinging remnants of the Constantinian era, this is understandable. We are painfully aware of the consequences of that conversion; for centuries the Church was allied with the established power, sanctioned and even wielded the sword, lost its critical relation to the ruling authorities. But what should the Church of the fourth century have done? Should it have refused to baptise the Emperor on the ground that it is better for the spiritual health of the Church to be persecuted than

to be in the seats of power? The discussion is unrealistic and futile. We have to accept that as a matter of fact the first great attempt to translate the universal claim of Christ into political terms was the Constantinian settlement. Christ as Pantocrator took on the lineaments of the Roman Emperor. We cannot go behind that; we have to live with its consequences and learn from them. These consequences are familiar to us. When the whole of society (except the Jews) is baptised and the Church is the spiritual arm of the establishment, the critical role of the Church devolves upon separate bodies – the monks, the radical sectarian groups, the millenarian movements on the fringes of the Church.

But in the last three centuries western Christendom has moved into a new situation. A new ideology has replaced the Christian vision as the *cultus publicus* of western Christendom. It is the vision which dawned in that remarkable experience which those who shared it called ‘the enlightenment’. It was a new vision of the world as totally explicable by means of the new tools for rational analysis which were being developed, and of man as the bearer of the meaning of his own history, and of the future as an ever-expanding mastery of man’s reason over nature leading to a golden age of total rationality and total mastery over all the powers that threaten man. The word ‘enlightenment’ (reminiscent of the experience of the Buddha) expresses the quality of this vision. Light had dawned and darkness was being banished. The previous centuries during which Europe had been christianised, were darkness. The rest of the world (with the possible exception of China) was darkness. Now the light had dawned; western man had only to walk in that light, spread that light, and all the nations would have fellowship one with another. The ‘blood of Jesus’ (I Jn. 1:7) was not required.

At the risk of extreme over-simplification one would have to say that the Church failed to challenge this new *cultus publicus* effectively and took the road which the early Church had refused; it retreated into the private sector. The new vision was allowed to control public life. The ‘enlightened’ world carried its message, its science and technology, and its masterful relation to the world, into every part of the globe. The Christian vision was allowed to illuminate personal and domestic life, but not to challenge the vision that controlled the public sector. The Church took on more and more the shape which the early Church had refused: it became a group of societies which were seen as offering spiritual consolation and the hope of personal salvation to those who chose to belong.

# What We Can Learn from the Early Church about Making Disciples

*[extracts from a D. min. thesis by Jay Koyle]*

The early church [won new members] not by the persuasion of a massive evangelization program, uncritical alignment with dominant cultural norms, worship designed to attract “outsiders” or the coercion of imperial force. Rather, it flourished as a result of the *questions* generated by the manner in which Christians lived and served together.

The agenda [of the early church] was to form a people liberated from the addictions of their age — the trappings of wealth and materialistic discontent, neglect of the poor and vulnerable, “peace” enforced by military might and political dominance, sexual promiscuity, magic and other occult practices, xenophobic hostility — and re-pattern lives according to the Reign of God revealed in the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Changes in behaviour were emphasized in the understanding that only people who lived like Christians could understand Christian teaching, and only as lives were patterned by the gospel could adherents comprehend themselves as a distinctive people. As a new ethic of behaviour was forged, a requisite sense of belonging emerged as well. This realignment of identification was quickened by liturgical observances that punctuated the conversion process, culminating in the celebration of Baptism and [admission] to the Eucharistic table.

In an era when the church experiences an identity crisis and lack of clarity regarding its mission, belonging and behaving are the categories demanding stress. Again, this is not to discount the importance of doctrinal instruction or an overall concern with belief. However, our Christendom legacy renders it fairly easy for us to focus on cognitive dimensions of the faith, sometimes to the point of distraction, without effecting transformation in living. The first focus in the [desired transformation] must [be] the “given” of belonging amongst the baptized. In an individualistic, voluntaristic culture, people need to be led into forms of covenant identity.

# What we can learn from the Early Church about infant baptism

*John Hill*

## CONFORMITY OR INTENTIONALITY?

In the New Testament, baptism was something that happened for converts: for example, people who heard Peter on the Day of Pentecost, the Ethiopian befriended by Philip, the household of Cornelius visited by Peter, etc. They heard the news of what God had done through Jesus, they opened their hearts to accept its implications, they joined the community of disciples, they began to experience the power of the Spirit. And baptism was the sign and seal of this conversion.

Over the first few centuries, the Christian movement continued to develop its wisdom and skill in making disciples, in a process called the catechumenate, a process that climaxed in baptism. Christians cultivated contacts with non-believers with compassion, and in response to their spiritual interest; and inquirers were helped to understand something of the story and lifestyle of believers, and the costliness of it. If they still wanted to know more, and were prepared to undertake the basic disciplines of the Christian life, they were inducted as apprentices (called catechumens) and shared the company of the believers who gathered week by week, hearing the scriptures read and taught. The Christian friends who first connected with these apprentices would become their sponsors, testifying to the seriousness of their interest; and then as the apprentices grew in faith and obedience to the way of Christ, the sponsors would be required to testify to the authenticity of their devotion. Only then could they be accepted as candidates for baptism, once it was clear that they were ready to make a life-long commitment.

Candidates would then begin to prepare for baptism, through prayer and fasting, and the testing of their hearts. Customarily, this would come to a climax at the Great Vigil of Easter; they would be baptized and brought into the community as full members, sharing at the Lord's Table. During the weeks immediately following their baptism, they would be guided into an appreciation of the sacramental life which they now shared. Parents who were being baptized (or had already been baptized) would sometimes bring their children to baptism as well, a family solidarity that the Church recognized and supported.

Such was the care the Church exercised in making disciples. By the time adult candidates got as far as a decision about baptism, their intentions were usually very clear – something of no little importance considering the weighty responsibility they bore as witnesses to Christ in a hostile society.

But then, as if by some special grace of God, the Roman Emperor converted, apparently deciding that the Christian faith was the best tool available for uniting his empire. Public acceptance of the Christian faith was actively encouraged; and soon it was no longer costly to be a Christian – in fact it became costly to hold out against it! Eventually,

candidates for baptism were no longer being scrutinized concerning their real intentions; they were being accepted in droves because conformity had become the new Christian virtue.

Needless to say, it was not long before the majority of baptismal candidates were infants; there were soon no more adults seeking baptism. Eventually, baptism became a matter of conformity: laws were enacted to ensure that people did not hesitate to bring newborns to the font. This made sense when the whole culture was professedly Christian: why leave out the children, when they were loved by God as much as anyone else? In the early middle ages, children were also communicants – until clergy began to think that the sacrament of the Table was holier than the people who came to eat it, and began to worry about children spitting out the bread or spilling the cup.

But with the Enlightenment, things began to change in the so-called Christian world. There was a growing rebellion against the authority of the Church, and more and more people opted out of the Christian faith, some by degrees, some by wholesale rejection of its teachings. It became fashionable to be sceptical; and scepticism was one of the foundations of the emerging new authority: the authority of science. By our own day it has become clear that conformity no longer leads people into Church membership; people no longer have to opt out. In fact, they have to opt in, consciously and intentionally, if they are going to be Christians in the modern world. We are back to the position of the early Church, at least in this respect. It is vitally important that the way we celebrate baptism should reflect and support this new reality: that people become Christians and members of Christ's Church not by conformity but by choice and intention.

#### LIFE-STAGE SACRAMENTS (*conformity*)

The pattern of sacramental life we inherited is one shaped by the long centuries of Christendom, and reshaped, for some of us, by the 16th century Reformation. For example, the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer offers us an image of human civilization ordered by God's grace: morning and evening prayer, by which daily life is sanctified; weekly remembrance of the Lord's death which won for us this Christian civilization; and a series of pastoral offices: baptism, confirmation, matrimony, churching of women, ministry to the sick, and burial of the dead, all of which are geared to the ages and stages of life, sanctifying the times and seasons of our lives from the cradle to the grave. The difficulty for us in using such an order today is its assumption of a Christian civilization, in which every citizen will of course share this sanctified cycle of life. When baptism and confirmation are life-stage sacraments, the assumption is that they are celebrated automatically when a person is of the right age. Babies are baptized just

because they are babies, even when their parents apparently have no intention of living as members of Christ and his Church. Young people are confirmed just because they are the right age, even if their greatest concern happens to be conformity to the youth culture. All of this happens in the radically altered context of a post-Christendom culture. In the process, the authentic character of Christian discipleship is quietly betrayed, over and over again, until no one, not even the faithful, really believes what we say any more.

## A CONVERSION SACRAMENT (*intentionality*)

One of the seldom observed characteristics of the revised prayer books of the Anglican Communion is that the order of Holy Baptism has been moved out of that series of pastoral services that is tied to the life-cycle and now stands as the first of the two gospel sacraments that define the life of the Church. What will our sacramental practice look like if it expresses and celebrates the very real phenomenon of the Gospel taking root in people's lives? What will have to change in our practice of the sacraments if they are to express *intentionality* instead of *conformity*, response to God's call instead of capitulation to the pressure of grandparents? We know that we cannot go back to the practice of the early Church, and pretend that we are a mysterious little movement distinguished for its courage of faith and its stamina under persecution. Inquirers do not bring great curiosity about the source of this mysterious power; instead they bring a lot of baggage of expectations from past experience or hearsay; and more often than not, they bring wildly corrupted notions of both the Church and the gospel. So we cannot respond to them in the same way the first Christians responded to inquirers. Nevertheless, something like the ancient Church's care and thoroughness in making disciples is going to be essential in our ministry from here on in.

Over the past few years much work has been done in all historic branches of the Church to begin reconstructing the shape of that ministry – a [contemporary catechumenate](#) – in the expectation that the day will soon come when inquirers will once again approach us to find a new experience of God's grace. They will be people disillusioned with the rat-race of consumer culture and the empty-headed spirituality of new-age trendiness; they will be suspicious of our institutions, to be sure, but hungry for true wisdom and healing power in their daily living. We need to know how to serve them faithfully, how to guide them beyond cynicism to open-hearted trust in the way of Christ, how to incorporate them, step by step, into a community of faith. And that is what a catechumenal ministry is all about.

In the meantime, this vision calls in question our inherited patterns of ministry to people who bring their babies for baptism. The problem is not theirs, for we taught them the path of sacramental conformity. The problem is ours: it is we who must learn to do better, and offer these young parents a path toward intentional participation in the community of the covenant.

Some very large hurdles confront us, however. For one, unless our congregations can share this vision, we will only be spinning our wheels. But involving members of the congregation in sponsoring young families for baptism can certainly help to rebuild the vision within the congregation.

Another hurdle is the clash of expectations. Here are just two. First, there will often be the clash between the expectations of the *parents*, who want to know when the baptism can be scheduled, and *our* expectations that they may need to explore the meaning of discipleship first. Second, there will be the clash between *our* expectation that we must incorporate them, by hook or by crook, into our common life because we cannot turn

them away, and the *Gospel's* expectation that only those who take up a cross can follow the way of Christ.

## HOUSEHOLD CHRISTENDOM

Another change which some contemporary forms of the baptismal rite have brought is that instead of having two rites for baptism (one for children, and one for “such as are of riper years”), one rite only is provided, with rubrics that show how to adapt the rite when the candidates are too young to answer for themselves. What this makes clear is that normally candidates *are* expected to answer for themselves. When this is not possible, we must face some major questions. In theory, this was always understood: in the Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer, the explanation of baptism applies only to *adult* baptism; and the question that immediately follows is, “Why then are infants baptized?” The Catechism goes on to offer the rationale; but clearly, infant baptism (even if it *is* the commonest form of Baptism) is seen as an exceptional practice, the normative form being the baptism of those who can answer for themselves.

Of course, as we all know, in infant baptism, the parents and sponsors answer for the child’s baptism, something which they certainly cannot do unless they can first answer for themselves. So our ministry to families bringing children to baptism must begin by *preparing the parents to reaffirm the covenant of their own baptism.*

However, the argument for the appropriateness of baptizing all infants during those long centuries of Christian civilization was that you couldn’t grow up in that culture without sharing in the Christian world-view; you couldn’t be a non-Christian unless you opted out! Nowadays, *nobody* grows up that way, unless they live in a *household* that has a distinctly Christian culture. Is it possible to imagine such a household whose daily life is so shaped by the Christian story, Christian prayer, Christian assumptions, values and conduct that a young child growing up there cannot even imagine not being a Christian? This phenomenon could be called ‘Household Christendom,’ And a child born into such a ‘Household Christendom’ cannot conceivably be left out of the Christian covenant. That is the situation in which infant baptism is entirely justified. It is not, however, merely a household in which the parents happen to be churchgoers.

As noted at the beginning, the New Testament tells us about the circumstances in which baptism was first administered. People heard the news of what God had done through Jesus, they opened their hearts to accept its implications, they joined the community of disciples, they began to experience the power of the Spirit. And baptism was the sign and seal of this conversion.

Likewise, infant baptism is the sign and seal of the Christian identity of a child who hears, from its earliest days, the story of what God has done through Jesus, brings a child’s open heart to explore the implications of that story, is physically included in the community of disciples, and experiences in a child’s way the power of the Holy Spirit. This, I believe, is the meaning of infant baptism in a Post-Christendom world; and it is

this meaning that must replace the popular notion of baptism as inoculation against God's wrath.

Thus, the other dimension of ministry to parents who bring their children to baptism must be a ministry that *guides them in developing and sustaining a Christian household*, one in which their baptized infant will grow up with a Christian imagination, conscious of being a child of God and a follower of Jesus Christ, and unable to imagine not being a Christian.