

## Marginal and Missional

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### From marginal to mainstream to marginal

#### 'The road thus far traversed' (1) – The times before Constantine

The words 'marginal' and 'mainstream' refer to the position of the church of Christ and the Christian in the world. The position of the early Christian church was **marginal**. First having been seen as a Jewish sect, it proceeded to establish its own identity in the often hostile Roman environment.

Christianity was an illegal religion, looked upon with disdain. The Christians were seen as a danger to the unity and prosperity of the empire and therefore suffered discrimination. Sometimes directly persecuted, yet always living in uncertainty and without freedom to fully live the faith, Christians truly experienced that they were strangers, travelers passing by on their way to real Fatherland. The

**Letter to Diognetus**, written by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century expresses this very well <sup>1</sup>:

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life. (...) [They] follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvelous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all.<sup>2</sup>

In less than 400 years, however, by God's providence, the small house churches expanded into a large community, even becoming the state church of the Roman empire.<sup>3</sup>

The book of Acts shows us how the apostle Paul and his co-workers Timothy and Titus were traveling around, preaching to Jews and pagans, evangelizing and planting churches. Ancient sources also tell us about the journeys of the other apostles. Thomas is said to have gone to India,

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1 The author of this epistle is unknown. Sometimes it is suggested, that Justin or Hyppolite of Rome wrote this letter, but there is no real evidence for these assumptions. There are relations with Clement of Alexandria's 'Protrepticus' (end 2<sup>nd</sup> – beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century).

2 Letter to Diognetus, ch. 5.

3 See e.g.:

- Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society. From Galilee to Gregory the Great*. New York 2001.

- Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity. How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. Princeton. 1997.

- Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom. Triumph and Diversity, AD 200-1000*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford. 2003.

- E. Glenn Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire. Identity and Adaptability*. Macon, Georgia. 1981.

James, the brother of Jesus to Spain and Andrew to the East (and even said to have stood before the hills of Kiev). But there is very little evidence that this was the way in which the Christian faith was spread after the apostolic period,. The main impression we get from the sources is that the church grew, in the first place, through **Christian households and personal relations**. This was partly due to the circumstances of persecution, which did not allow for public evangelism. Also, churches were cautious to accept new members, because new members could prove to be intruders.

### 'The road thus far traversed' (2) – Constantine and the Corpus Christianum

After Constantine came to power, the church was no longer persecuted, becoming more and more privileged. In 391 Christianity even became the official religion of the Roman state. In order to further your career as a state official you had better become a Christian!

That means, that from the 4<sup>th</sup> century on, the church faced a totally new situation, no longer consisting of a relatively small elite group of people, who were ready to risk their lives for their faith. The masses started coming to church! Having started as a group of people with a remarkable lifestyle, the church now became an imperial institution. When Constantine came to power a mere 10% of the population may have been Christian. By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century this had become 50%. Gradually, a new (religious) civilization came into being, later often referred to as

### 'Christendom'.

Christianization was no longer a 'natural process' of people who were attracted to the church.

Conversions were often formal, or even enforced.

We should realize, that Christianity was first established in the cities and only slowly permeated the country-side.<sup>4</sup> From the 4<sup>th</sup> century on, the Gospel was preached foremost in the cities, to the higher classes and to the wealthy. The idea was, that they would convert their slaves and servants to Christianity as well.<sup>5</sup> Church leaders such as Caesarius of Arles, developed strategies not only for the 'christianization', but also for the 'depaganization' of the people. Christianization was done mainly by means of instruction and persuasion. But depaganization was 'an essentially destructive effort, imposed on an unwilling population'.<sup>6</sup>

'Chastise those whom you know to be [guilty of pagan worship]; warn them very harshly; scold them very severely. And if they are not corrected, beat them if you have the power; and if they are not improved by this, cut off their hair too. And if they still persevere, bind them in iron shackles, so that those whom the grace of God does not hold, a chain may hold (*Sermon 53.2*)'.<sup>7</sup>

4 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Yale. 2003.

5 Ramsay McMullen, *Christianity Shaped through its Mission*. In: Alan Kreider (ed.), *The Origins of Christendom in the West*. (T&T Clark LTD, Edinburgh-New York). 2001. pp. 97-117.

6 William E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles: The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul*. Cambridge. 1994. p. 226f. See also: Ramsay McMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire. (A.D. 100-400)*. Yale. 1984.

7 Klingshirn, o.c., p. 239.

European princes and leaders thought it would be best for the future of their people to become Christian. They wanted to become a part of that Christian world with its relatively high level of culture and civilization. That was what took place with the Franks and the Anglo-Saxons. It also happened, somewhat later, in Hungary and Kiev Rus' – in the empire, of which Kiev was the center. Charlemagne and other Christian rulers also spread Christendom by coercion, enlarging their territory at the same time. Of course there were also examples of the evangelistic work of monks, who ministered to the people, like Venerable Bede. We have the example of Cyrill and Method in the East, who made great effort to relate to the people. Yet the basic model of Christianization remained top-down – through the princes and authorities.

The result of this policy was, that the identity of the church and the perception of what it means to become or to be a Christian drastically changed. 'Conversions' in this new setting were not seldom unwilling and for that reason also doomed to be incomplete, which was especially true of the common people. People were called Christians, but in their heart many of them remained pagans. The pagan temples and the holy trees could be destroyed, but the underlying structure of paganism often remained intact and was often even introduced into the church. This is especially visible in death rituals, burials and all kinds of pagan festivals that were 'christianized'.

### **'The road thus far traversed' (3) – Modern times**

We now take a big leap in time into the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the Middle Ages efforts were made to evangelize the lay people and bring them to faith. This happened e.g. through sermons in vernacular, through the work of monks, giving only limited results. One of the reasons was the difference between clergy and lay people. Bringing lay people to a personal faith in Christ was not something the Roman Catholic church was aiming at. Most lay people could not read and if they could, they were not allowed to read the Bible. They could not fully participate in, or even understand, the liturgy. Moreover, the possibility to pay for one's sins with indulgences severely undermined personal and public morality.

The Reformation can be seen as a serious effort to change this situation. Preaching in vernacular became the standard in the Protestant churches. Luther's Bible translation, numerous catechisms and theological books written for lay people changed the situation for the better. The Roman Catholic church also put more effort into the instruction of its lay people. Yet we should also take into account, that the Reformation was in most cases a 'magisterial Reformation', in which the top down approach of the Middle Ages remained intact. The 'cuius regio, eius religio' principle illustrates this clearly enough. Even in the Protestant countries the results of this approach were not as positive as one would wish. Only a quick glance at the books and sermons by Puritans and Pietists throughout the next centuries could tell us this.

But from the 16<sup>th</sup> century a new challenge arose, for Protestants and Roman Catholics alike: the Enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> We see the birth of a new era, called '**modernity**'. Philosophers and scientists started challenging the authority of the church and the Bible. Belief in miracles and in a God who is actively present in this world was no longer acceptable for a growing number of people. This resulted in the decay of the Christian world from the inside out. The facade of the 'corpus Christianum' often remained intact, meaning that most Europeans regarded themselves as Christians. But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular, reality became more and more visible. With a variation on the atheist Nietzsche we could say: everywhere in Western Europe we see huge churches and cathedrals – but they are often nothing more than the monumental graves of Christendom.

Once upon a time... I studied Dutch language and literature at the university of Utrecht. One of the subjects I really enjoyed was Medieval literature. Of course the literature of that period was highly influenced by Christianity; nearly all texts referred to persons and stories from the Bible. But I only realized how secular our age had become when one of my fellow students raised her hand and asked: 'Who is this Mary, who is mentioned at page 3?' The answer that Mary was the mother of Jesus did not really help her either.

The Christian faith became **marginal** in most of Western Europe. In Southern and Eastern Europe, also in Ukraine, the facade of Christendom, is still intact. People go to church at Christmas and Easter, or to be baptized, married or buried, and church representatives still have a certain authority in society. These are all moments, which can be used in order to preach the Gospel. But the tragedy is the same as in Western Europe: the core message of the Christian faith is not understood by the majority of the people that call themselves Christians. While Christianity is still a part of the culture and tradition, there is often a lack of biblical personal faith.

At this point in time our confessing Reformed churches are having a difficult time. It is not just the fact that we are marginalized. My impression, based upon what I see and hear in The Netherlands, is that we might very well have a problem with the **identity** of our churches, which stands in the way of us being really attractive or missional. To many people in The Netherlands, the church is considered to be a product that has outrun its expiration date. It no longer sells.

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8 See e.g.:

- John Henry, *Religion and the Scientific Revolution*. In: Peter Harrison (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*. Cambridge. 2010, p. 39-58.
- Jonathan R. Topham, *Natural theology and the sciences*. In: Peter Harrison (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*. Cambridge. 2010. p. 59-79.
- W. Andrew Hoffercker (ed.), *Revolutions in Worldviews. Understanding the Flow of Western Thought*. Philipsburg. 2007.
- Stephen Gaukroger, *The Emergence of a Scientific Culture. Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210–1685*. Oxford. 2006.

Not long ago I talked to a young couple from the Reformed Churches (lib.), confessing members, really serious Christians that were about to move to another city. I inquired about the church in their new town and the answer was: well, we want a church that is close to our house, because if it is far away we will not be able to attend regularly, there should be a fair group of young people our age, or we will not feel at home and there should be good, attractive worship too.

People refer to certain passages from Scripture that inspire them. They refer to the guidance of the Holy Spirit - and then move on to behave as if they were the first Christians. There is often an aversion to theology and tradition among young Christians. For many the Reformed confessions no longer function as identity markers.<sup>9</sup> Instead of that, there is a thirst for experience, a hunger for community and fellowship. Others long for a more 'tangible' religion: more emphasis on liturgy and the sacraments. The result is, that people move easily from one church or denomination to another, in search of a church that fulfills their needs.

### **Are there lessons to be learnt from the past?**

Instead of complaining about the situation in our churches today, I would like us to ask ourselves the following question. Looking back at the road thus far traversed: is it possible to learn something from what happened in the past? Looking into the mirror of the Ancient Church, what could we learn for today, that can encourage our churches to continue to carry the Light?

In order to answer this question, I would like to raise two other **questions first**:

1. What made Christianity attractive or unattractive in first centuries? What made it grow?
2. What was involved in becoming a Christian in the Early church?

After that, I return to my initial question: can we learn something from the Early church?

#### **1. What made the church attractive in the first centuries?<sup>10</sup>**

Without denying or diminishing God's guidance in history, it is not a bad idea to raise the question from a purely human perspective: what was it, that people found attractive, or convincing, in the Christian faith?

a. The Christian **world-view** gave **answers** to questions about life, death, redemption, and forgiveness of guilt and sin. In cases of suffering by epidemic diseases, Christians offered an explanation about God's will and guidance in human life. To many people the Christian answer was

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9 See also: Ronald N. Gleason, *Church and Community or Community and Church?* In: *Reforming or Conforming? Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church*. Edited by Gary L.W. Johnson and Ronald N. Gleason. p. 168f.

10 Stark, *Rise*, chapter 4. See the Easter Letter of Dionysius 260; Tertullian, *Apology* (esp. chapter 39); Henk Bakker, *'Ze hebben lief, maar worden vervolgd'. Radicaal Christendom in tweede eeuw en nu*. Zoetermeer. 2005. p. 23f.; Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*. (Penguin). 1993, p. 54f.

more convincing than popular fatalism (the gods are silent...). Christians comforted them in times of despair. Christian faith in the resurrection and eternal life gave the people hope. (1Cor. 15: 12f.; 1Pet. 1: 20f.)

b. Christian **life-style** and **ethics** were in sharp contrast with the often immoral life in the army, at the courts and also in the rites of the mystery religions. (Eph. 2: 1f. ; Eph. 4:17-32) If anything became clear from the trials against Christians, then it is, that they were not accused of any public crime, corruption or immorality.

c. The **social concern** of Christians was often exercised under the guidance of deacons. This implied a concern for the poor, the socially weak and the prisoners - imprisoned martyrs, but also others. In ancient times epidemic diseases were an enormous threat to society and to the state. In the midst of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century a plague under emperor Marcus Aurelius was the cause of the death of a third of the population. Christians often took care of the sick, which made a deep impression on the people. (Mat. 25: 35f.)

d. **Hospitality** shown both to Christians and non Christians was a striking feature of Christian life. Christians realized that they themselves were strangers in this world. But they also recognized Christ in the strangers (Mat. 25, 35; Hebr. 11, 13-14 and 13, 1-2).<sup>11</sup>

e. The Christian **community** was a powerful force. Christians helped and supported each other – from the first congregation in Jerusalem on this was a characteristic – Acts 2, 41f. Those who joined the church found a new family with strong shared convictions and values.

#### **Justin Martyr**

(...) we who formerly delighted in fornication, but now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts, dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies...<sup>12</sup>

f. The public **martyrium** and Christian witness during the trials and tortures deeply impressed the people. The Greek word 'martyreoo' actually means: to witness, to show! A martyr was somebody who witnessed Christ! (Luk. 12:9; 2Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:13) Often a public execution of a martyr would bring even more people to faith in Christ – not only because they understood, that Christians were innocent, but also because they recognized, that God was with these people in their sufferings.

#### **Tacitus**

And perishing they were additionally made into sports: they were killed by dogs by having the

11 Amy Oden, *God's Household of Grace. Hospitality in Early Christianity*. In: *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity. Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Ed. Kenneth Tanner & Christopher A. Hall. Inter Varsity Press. 2002. P. 38-48. See also: Wayne E. Meeks, *The origins of Christian Morality. The First Two Centuries*. Yale. 1993. p. 104f.

12 Justin, *Apologia*, I.14; see also: Meeks, o.c.. P. 84ff.

hides of beasts attached to them, or they were nailed to crosses or set aflame, and, when the daylight passed away, they were used as nighttime lamps. Nero gave his own gardens for this spectacle and performed a Circus game, in the habit of a charioteer mixing with the plebs or driving about the race-course. Even though they were clearly guilty and merited being made the most recent example of the consequences of crime, people began to pity these sufferers, because they were consumed not for the public good but on account of the fierceness of one man.’<sup>13</sup>

**Summarizing:** what was attractive in the Early church for the people then, was that Christians were authentic witnesses. They lived a 'transparent life'. They had nothing to hide, because God sees everything. They not only believed in what they said, but they *lived* what they said. The fact that they were strangers in this world, did not separate them from this world, but stimulated them to love both their brothers and sisters and people around them. It stimulated them to be involved in this world in a practical sense.

However, the Early church was also **discriminated and persecuted**. For what reasons? What made the Early church an object of disdain and even hatred?

a. Christians did not participate in the **Hellenist culture** and way of living because this was often directly related to pagan religiosity; for instance the guilds (trade-corporations) see: 1Cor. 10, 14-22; Rev. 13, 11-18. For this reason they were often not able to fully participate in 'social life'. They were accused of 'hatred against the human race' (Tacitus).

b. Christians had a different **life-style** – a different sexual morality, a different way of doing business, a different approach to family-life, abortion and euthanasia, a different perspective on death and life after death. To pagans this was often ridiculous and offensive.

c. Intellectuals despised Christians because of their **exclusive pretension** of possessing the **truth**. They argued that, while Christians had little education and knowledge, they still think that they have the answers to the deepest philosophical questions, questions upon which philosophers had been reflecting for centuries! Yet Christians kept up the exclusive claim that 'there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4, 12).<sup>14</sup>

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13 Tacitus, *Annales* XV 44, 4-5. Rodney Stark, *Rise*, ch. 8 offers an interesting discussion about the credibility of martyrdom. Against the opinion of many sociologists that martyrs were masochists or psychopaths, he defends that martyrdom was a 'rational choice' as believers knew very well that the 'reward' they would receive was much more desirable than the gain of being set free of torture.

14 Another point of criticism from the side of the intellectuals, was that Greek philosophy had overcome the primitive ancient Greek myths. In Platonism, Greek philosophers had developed a rational idea of God. Intellectuals thought that Christians reintroduced the ancient myths, when they heard them talk about the Son of God who became man, was born from a virgin, performed miracles, resurrected from the dead, etc.

**Summarizing:** the church was despised because Christians were 'different', had old-fashioned opinions and claimed to know 'the truth'. I think that we, in that sense, are closer to the Early church, than we would like to acknowledge:

- we can no longer count on unbelievers whom we are talking to having any religious foreknowledge – although they might be familiar with some Christian architecture or ideas, basic knowledge of God or the Bible is often lacking
- the claim of exclusive truth, which is inherent to the Person and work of Jesus Christ, is as counter-cultural today, as it was in the Hellenist environment of the Early church
- a Christian world-view, with clear positions on topics like creation and divine providence, with Biblical positions on sexual chastity, homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia is regarded to be out-dated – sometimes also by people in the church.

## **2. What did 'conversion' mean in the Early Church?**

Now we come to what I consider to be the most essential part of what I wish to say today. While listening to what was said about the Early church, we might see some parallels, but still we could say: we are living in different times now.

However, the next question treads on more common ground: 'What did it mean in the Early church to become and to be a Christian? If we confess that we believe in one holy 'catholic' Christian church – then there should be points of recognition. There are many questions here, which are relevant in every evangelistic contact:

- ⤴ What makes a person a Christian? Is it baptism, faith, knowledge, lifestyle? What is 'enough' in order for a person to be named a 'Christian'? When can we call a country or civilization 'Christian'?
- ⤴ What was it exactly that the new converts accept? What instruction, knowledge or teaching is given to them? What model of Christian life is presented to them and what is required of them with respect to Christian life?
- ⤴ What are the expectations of the potential converts? Often missionaries meet with 'empirical religiosity': people considered to become Christians because they believed that it would bring them material or other rewards in this present world.<sup>15</sup>

For now I would like to reduce all these questions to one simple question: **'What is conversion'?**

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Fletcher, *Conversion of Europe*, p. 6f. gives a short overview of these issues in a historic-missionary setting.

The words 'epistrophe', 'metanoia', and 'conversio' all connoted **change**, a change of **belief**, but very clearly also a change of **behavior**, and of **belonging**.<sup>16</sup>

It is the change of the road along which we walk to another. The destination of the new road was salvation. Salvation is meeting Christ, living in community with Him. It also implies: being implemented in the Body of Christ, the church. New believers were 'reborn' into a new network of new relations and responsibilities, new values, they received a new status in a new society.<sup>17</sup>

**Alan Kreider** wrote: 'The task of conversion was to reshape an entire way of living and system of values'. He identifies the following elements as essential in order to understand early Christian conversion: belief, belonging, behavior, experience and ritual (esp. the sacraments).<sup>18</sup>

While, in fact, all of these elements play a role when somebody becomes a Christian, in the course of time the relation between these elements changed. Some elements were neglected, others overemphasized, some nearly disappeared. I would like to give you some illustrations of this process.

#### a. **Belief**

From the beginning the church took care of the instruction of its new members, by offering them '**catechetical instruction**'. The word 'katechoos' contains the word 'echo'. The Word of God should 'echo' not only in the mind, but also in the life of the listener. We find a report of the catechetical procedures in the so-called **Apostolic Tradition**, a document from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, which seems to reflect the Western practice.<sup>19</sup>

The first thing that comes to our notice is that the Early Church was not exactly 'seeker-sensitive'. After the persecutions by Nero, churches were very careful when accepting new members. The length of the catechetical period varied from place to place – it was usually about three years, sometimes longer. The goal of catechesis was not just instruction, but **transformation**. As the Apostolic Tradition puts it: 'If a man is keen, and perseveres well in the matter, the time shall not be judged, but only his conduct.'

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16 Mat. 3:8; Luk. 3:8; Act 14: 15; Acts 26: 20 etc.

John M. Headley, *Conversion in Retrospect*. In: Calvin B. Kendall, Oliver Nicholson, William D. Philips, Jr. and Marguerite Ragnow (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas*. USA – Minnesota. 2009. p. 364.

17 Thoman M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate. Italy North Africa and Egypt*. Minnesota. 1992. p. 3.

18 Kreider, *Conversion and Christendom: an Anabaptist Perspective*. Paper presented at Mennonite - Roman Catholic international Dialogue. December 2000. Compare also his earlier publication Kreider, Alan. 1999. *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International. In Kreider the element of 'ritual' didn't receive a structural place, p. xv and xvi.

19 *The Apostolic Tradition Of Hippolytus*. Translated Into English With Introduction And Notes By Burton Scott Easton. par. 16. See also Clinton E. Arnold, *Early Church Catechesis And New Christians' Classes In Contemporary Evangelicalism*. JETS 47/1 (March 2004) 39–54.

During the first centuries there was no clearly defined content for the catechetical period.<sup>20</sup> From church fathers such as Justin and Ireneus we know, that the main content of the OT and NT was read and explained as an account of the history of salvation. In many places catechesis was a process of several years.<sup>21</sup> The explanation of the Creed and the meaning of the sacraments ('mysterium') took place only at the very end of the process, just before Baptism. It is interesting to see that the order and the accents changed over time. In the first centuries, when the church had to fear persecutions, ethics were often very important: 'truth in the soul' and 'holiness in the body' belonged together.<sup>22</sup>

When Christianity became a legitimate religion, the emphasis lay more and more on teaching, while the care for a Christian life was placed in the background. Gregory of Nyssa's catechetical instructions contain nearly a complete systematic theology. But with regard to ethics, he just makes some general remarks about adultery, richness, honoring of parents. Augustine also laid a great emphasis on teaching. If he speaks about ethics at all, special attention is paid to sexual purity. After the 6<sup>th</sup> century, catechetical instruction declined more and more as a general practice in the church.

#### b. Behavior

Here too, the Apostolic Tradition gives interesting information.<sup>23</sup> First of all, new people were to be introduced by a **sponsor** – a congregation member, who took responsibility for the new person and would accompany him throughout the whole period of the catechumenate.<sup>24</sup>

After the sponsors were interviewed, the candidates were scrutinized: 'whether [the candidates] were capable of hearing the word.' In order to find that out, their motivation was examined, their marital status, and their craft or profession. If a candidate worked in one of the prohibited professions and he was, for example, a brothel-keeper, a charioteer who competed in the games, or someone who had 'the power of the sword' or 'was a magistrate of a city who wears the purple' they were to quit their jobs or be rejected as catechumens. It was apparently assumed, that only people who lived in keeping with the fundamental values of the community could comprehend its teaching. During the catechumenate people had to learn to leave their old values and solidarities behind. In short: the goal was '**re-socialization**'.

The *Apostolic Tradition* said: 'Let their life be examined,': 'Have they lived good lives when they were catechumens? Have they honored the widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every kind of good work?' If their sponsors could affirm that they have lived in this way, then, it

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20 Everett Ferguson, *Catechesis and Initiation*. In: Alan Kreider (ed.), *The Origins of Christendom in the West*. (T&T Clark LTD, Edinburgh-New York). 2001. p. 231f.

21 Harmless, William, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*. Minnesota. 1995.

22 Ferguson, *Catechesis*, p. 237.

23 Apostolic Tradition, o.c. par. 16.

24 Hinson, o.c., p.73f.; Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*. Cambridge. 1995. p. 21f.

pronounced, 'let them hear the gospel.'

Essential was: the process of becoming a Christian was a **gradual process, which took place in the community and fellowship of the other believers**. By living with other Christians their approach to life and thinking changed! Thus the start was not with a 'decision' of faith, but with a desire to belong and live in fellowship with other believers.

But both in the East and West the emphasis on a radical life changing choice disappeared when freedom came. In Syria, for example, the compilers of the Apostolic Constitutions then make interesting compromises to the radicalism of Jesus: 'If any one give thee a stroke on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also' is followed by the comment: 'Not that revenge is evil, but that patience is more honorable.'<sup>25</sup>

### c. **Belonging**

People who come to Christ should become members of the Body of Christ, the congregation. We can imagine that this was totally different for people who lived in times when Christians were persecuted, publicly tortured and executed, than to people who lived in the time of Constantine the Great and later - when people were even forced to accept the Christian faith. As we saw earlier conversion was re-socialization. The process of instruction and catechism was a long one. It took years before the new believers were baptized, participated in the prayer of the faithful, received the holy kiss, participated in the Lord's Supper.

Why did the catechetical process take so long? In short:

1. Old Habits Die Hard
2. Bad Theology Must Be Addressed
3. The Church Has Enemies
4. Discipleship Costs.<sup>26</sup>

After the church became 'mainstream', the meaning of conversion changed. Conversion, in the sense of a personal commitment to Christ and his church, became a 'second stage', not for ordinary people, but something for the monks and saints. It was now easy for people to become 'catechumens'. It was part of their career and of the life of a Roman citizen. In order to work in the emperor's service, one needed to be at least formally connected to the Christian church. However, this new generation of catechumens was not preparing for Baptism or participating in catechism classes. They were called Christians, but many would ask for Baptism only at their deathbed, because they thought that, in

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25 Alan Kreider, "*Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus' Teaching in Early Christianity*", Tyndale Bulletin 47.2 (Nov. 1996) 315–48.

26 Kreider, Baptism, p. 318 – see for the concise formulas: <http://pursiful.com/2011/03/a-case-for-catechesis>

this way, they would maximally profit from the cleansing effect of the sacrament.<sup>27</sup> Of course there were others, who did seriously prepare for baptism, just as in the times of the Early church, but their number was shrinking. The following step was that, instead of a practice by serious Christian families, infant baptism became a Christian routine for all babies, where no personal belief or commitment of the parents was required. Belonging was no longer connected to belief and behavior. The church, having started out as the church of few, became a state church, a 'corpus permixtum', to which everybody belonged, without taking responsibility for living a Christian life.

### **Concluding theses – is there something to be learnt?**

In general I find the 'holistic approach' to conversion very helpful and Biblical. History has demonstrated that once the different aspects start to fall apart, the church falls into decay.

I would like to list a few points to help us reflect on our own position as churches in the world:

1. The understanding of **conversion** in terms of '**transformation**' and '**re-socialization**' can avoid an individualistic approach in evangelism and catechetical instruction. Often expressions such as 'people come to Christ' or 'are saved' can be heard. I have no reason to doubt the truth of such expressions, but sometimes we get the impression that it does not matter to what church people go after they 'came to Christ'. I believe that, in this way, 'belief' and 'belonging' are separated. What is not taken into account is the importance of the church as the visible Body of Christ, the pillar and foundation of the truth (1Tim. 3:15).
2. Although the exact content of catechetical instruction was not clearly defined, we hear from influential teachers such as Irenaeus and Origen, that the Scriptures were read as the story of God's salvation. In the Reformed tradition it was especially Covenant theology, which taught us to read Scripture as a unity of Old and New Testament, in which see the history of God's salvation of his people unfolding. Reading the Scriptures with new members seems to me to be of great importance and should not be replaced by other 'good literature' (without denying the value of such literature of course!) (Luk. 24:27; 2Tim. 3:16).
3. Catechetical instruction in the ancient church was a process that took place within the context of the **congregation**. It was not just the pastor or evangelist that was working with these

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<sup>27</sup> See also Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, p. 617f.

people. There was a 'sponsor' (today we would say a 'buddy') who introduced the person and was with him during the whole process of introduction to the congregation and the congregation was present when there were talks and discussions with new people. In this way people were not just getting information about Christ, but they were introduced into the family of Christ, no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household (Eph. 2:19).

4. Individualism is one of the characteristics of our time. Christian **hospitality and fellowship** were one of the typical features of the Early Christian church, modelled on Acts 2:44 and 4:32f. One of the reasons of the success of the Alpha Course can be found exactly in this area – common meals and fellowship! People long for fellowship among people they can trust. Yet instead of being a feature of a 'new members class', it should be a task for the whole congregation.
5. First century Christians had a strong sense of **identity**. They had a distinct world-view, based on the conviction that God is the Good Creator and that He has a plan of salvation. They were not ashamed to express this.
6. Early Christians saw themselves as '**resident aliens**': in the world and yet not of the world. They showed love to people around them – the poor and the prisoners; the widows and orphans. This way of life was even a criteria for membership. Although I don't think the church should find its strength in all kind of social programs, I do think that it is important to reflect upon our attitude as Christians towards outcasts of our society.