

BOOK REVIEW

Kreider, Alan, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016). xiv + 321 pp. Pbk. \$26.99.

There is no short supply of competing narratives when it comes to Christianity's earliest identity, growth and eventual dominance in the West. The contemporary accounts vary widely: the popular conspiracy theories of mainstream lore (e.g. *The Da Vinci Code*, the original *Zeitgeist* film); the contrarian, debonair reflections of Elaine Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels* [New York: Vintage, 1989]; *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* [New York: Vintage, 1996]) and Bart Erhman (*How Jesus Became God* [New York: HarperOne, 2015]); the refined, in-house projects of Christian academia (e.g. N.T. Wright's *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series, the works of Larry Hurtado); the proposals of historians like 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* [San Francisco: HarperOne, 1997]), Ramsay MacMullen and Erhman (*The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); and everything else in between and beyond (such as the work of Candida Moss). The modern fight for Christianity's origins continues.

In terms of size and scope, Alan Kreider's *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* is a moderately ambitious project. But it would be a mistake to suggest that it is lacking rigour either in its argumentation or conclusions. The heart of Kreider's thesis is remarkably straightforward: the church grew because of the distinctive way in which Christians lived. More specifically, it was the church's disciplined *habitus* of patience and peace that attracted so many to convert. These characteristics are not only the primary reasons for the church's survival and success, but were distinctive features of the Christian life and

message itself. In a word, then, the early church (i.e. the church of the second and third centuries) *really did* re-incarnate the life of Jesus as the Body of Christ, and (therefore) *really did* have the same kind of impact on local communities that Jesus himself had in first-century Palestine. The story of the early church is the story of the Gospels continued.

Kreider makes this case by closely examining the early Christian writings on patience, the internal logic and culture created by those who experienced the power of the gospel and various facets surrounding public perception of believers. The book itself is divided into four parts: (1) ‘Growth and Patience’; (2) ‘Ferment’; (3) ‘Forming the Habitus’; and (4) ‘The Transformation of Patience’.

The first section analyzes the early Christian literature on patience. Kreider’s own summary is as follows (from p. 35): (1) ‘Patience is rooted in God’s character’; (2) ‘The heart of patience is revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ’; (3) ‘Patience is not in human control’; (4) ‘Patience is not in a hurry’; (5) ‘Patience is unconventional’; (6) ‘Patience is not violent’; (7) ‘Patience gives religious freedom’; and (8) ‘Patience is hopeful’.

Here Kreider skilfully examines such topics as public religion in the empire, private associations and a host of sociological and cultural tensions between the church and paganism. He lays out the events and historical milieu that prompted responses by religious communities and explains how these differing responses highlighted (once again) the oddity of Jesus-folk.

The Christians’ behavior could be deeply unsettling, jarring the people out of conventional pathways ... A few people—initially a tiny number of courageous people but soon a larger group—looked at the Christians, who were often most eloquent when they were not in control of situations, and intuited that another way of living was possible and that the Christian way of living was worth so much that they would give up everything to seek it. These people, who felt *pulled* to investigate the Christian communities seriously, also often were those who experienced the pagan groupings to be unsatisfying, and thus felt impelled—*pushed*—into the unexplored terrain of the Christian churches. This process happened gradually, by a process of fermentation (pp. 69-70).

The next section explores this ‘patient ferment’—a power force that energized the church’s growth. Kreider underscores the unprecedented role that women played in Christianity (continuing the more or less egalitarian trajectory established by Jesus and others) as well as the

influence of faithful domestic life and mixed marriages. He then zooms out to bring into view the church community as a whole. ‘Look ... how they love one another’, wrote Tertullian, ‘and how they are ready to die for each other’ (quoted on p. 58). This popular quotation genuinely captured the ethos of the second-, third- and fourth-generation church. Like Jesus, these Christians gave dignity and power to those who had little—and they also refused to use any kind of coercion in the process.

Critics made fun of the Christians, of course; and the believers responded by delighting in the presence of ‘our old women’. Writers such as Lactantius emphasized that the women were there because they wanted to be. Christianity was voluntary and uncompelled; women and men were both in the church because ‘there is free will in it (p. 104).

The early church’s lack of participation in civic roles, the military and other institutions of force was nothing short of radical. ‘Normal’ acts of violence like abortion/infant exposure, fighting in nationalistic wars and compelling others to convert were simply unthinkable. Even *viewing* violence—like those who indulged in the gory spectacle of gladiator games—‘outraged’ leaders (p. 117); ‘Didn’t believers see how profoundly the ethos of the games impacted their habitus?’ (Tertullian, cited on p. 117). And if a converted Christian was already a soldier, he could (in some cases) only remain in the Christian community if he refused to kill during his military service. As written in the *Epistle to Diognetus*, ‘compulsion is not God’s way of working’ (p. 120).

But this reflexive, instinctual, disciplined community of peace and patience—a community that so many found attractive—was not created without hard work. Kreider digs deep into the process of catechesis and baptism. The ‘Christians’ habitus was formed patiently, unhurriedly, through careful catechesis as well as through the communities’ reflexive behavior, and ... it was renewed in the regular worship of the Christian assemblies’ (p. 134). The basic content of the catechetical process involved: (1) ‘transforming the habitus’; (2) ‘avoiding idolatry’; (3) ‘learning the master narrative’; (4) ‘learning the teaching of Jesus’; (5) ‘memorizing biblical passages’; (6) ‘imitating role models’; (7) ‘fostering a culture of peace’; and (8) ‘kinesthetics’ (bodily habits and practices). What was the end result of this type of ‘programming’? Kreider answers during his study of Quirinius:

*Habitually*, Christians will share economically and care for the poor and the sick, widows and orphans; *habitually*, they will engage in business

with truthfulness, without usury, and without pursuing profit to the extent of going before pagan judges; *habitually*, they will be a community of contentment and sexual restraint; *habitually*, they will behave with the multifaceted nonviolence of patience (p. 169, emphasis mine).

In addition to the long and intense process of catechesis, Christians changed the hearts of many through their regular weekly meetings: the Saturday night banquet (first) and symposium (second). The specific social dynamics of these events are noteworthy:

All participants have to learn the habitus of the Christian banquet. The poor, who have never been at a banquet, need to learn the politesse and discipline of a meal. The richer members, who may have frequented an association's banquets, need to learn the values of a community that does not seat people by rank but values the poor as equals. And all—poorer and richer—need to learn to share life and worship with people different from themselves. All participants eat the same food; further, they receive the same Eucharist (p. 188).

The actions and structure of the symposium spoke loud and clear about what Christianity was all about: 'empowering the less educated and unconfident, cherishing the more powerful and yet restraining them, and making all participants sensitive to the divine presence and the dynamics of the community' (p. 188). Together, the banquet and symposium was an unforgettable experience that could not be compared to any other societal activity; '*I, a struggling stoneworker, have kissed a centurion!*' (p. 220).

Perhaps unfortunately (Kreider draws no particularly strong judgment), this tradition shifted sometime around the mid-200s so that a morning service largely replaced these Saturday evening activities. This was partly due to risks associated with the evening meal (being perceived as a threat to the empire's religious order). Kreider's discussion of this change is particularly fascinating for those who have always wondered how and why the features of Sunday morning rituals (e.g. the time, the format, Eucharistic meal-sampling instead of an actual meal) became such an ingrained feature of contemporary conceptions of 'church'—especially since this shift occurred *before*, and not during or after, the Constantinian administration. In any case, with a few simple modifications of order and quantity, the overall feel of the Christian community was now different:

(1) Order of service: The Word now preceded the sacrament. Whereas in the evening banquet the meal (including the bread and

wine) had come before the Word (in the symposium), in the morning service the Word (readings and sermon) came before the meal (the reception of the consecrated elements).

(2) Quantity of food: The quantity was now slight. The evening banquet's meal was replaced by a symbolic meal with 'normative tokenization' of bread, wine and water.

(3) Quantity of words: The words that ordinary worshipers spoke decreased, and the words that the leaders—the clergy—spoke increased. The sermons grew longer, and the style of worship became monological rather than communal.

The last section of the book incisively investigates how and why things changed with Emperor Constantine. In line with the book's thesis, Kreider concludes that

Constantine's reflexes were those of a Roman administrator, not of a faithful member in the Christian tradition. Constantine thought impatiently, instrumentally. Under him the state became an instrument of a missional program with two flanks, one flank that fostered and established the correct religion, and the other flank that punished and outlawed the erroneous groups that competed with the correct religion (p. 267).

As such, the habitus and structure of Christian community was permanently altered. No longer under the Spirit of peace, nonviolence and patience, 'Constantine invited Christians to plan and control' (p. 275). The living organism of the church thus entered dormancy as the cold walls of Christendom rose to dominance.

On first glance, it might be tempting to dismiss *The Patient Ferment* as an instance of the popular practice of invoking utopian nostalgia upon the primitive church. This would be a mistake, as his assessment is anything but grasping or unrealistic. Kreider notes a number of failures and struggles that threatened to undermine the ideals, functionality and culture of the community. 'Christians ... had to learn to live together', he comments at one point, 'This was not easy. They missed each other's cultural cues, and they offended each other. Together they were in the process of learning the cues of the new habitus they were developing, but this took time' (p. 216; cf. p. 143). In an age of increasing sensitivity and 'microaggressions', this is particularly encouraging for the church today. And as serious as it was for the fumbling community to draw lines and establish ethical and doctrinal boundaries, the believing community was more deeply characterized by

its non-coercive ethos and inclusivity of social outcasts and the oppressed; this fact alone might easily prompt churchgoers today to ask why a particular congregation does not reflect a similar type of composition (as opposed to, for example, a group of white, healthy, happy, well-to-do middle- and upper-class attendees).

One might also be tempted to dismiss Kreider's appraisal for being too simplistic, perhaps by shutting out dissenting opinion in contemporary secondary literature or by playing favourites with primary source authors. In fact, this is precisely an area in which *The Patient Ferment* proves most competent. Kreider's command of both primary and secondary source literature is beyond the call of duty for this kind of project. His shrewd sensitivity to various nuances of social perception, theological argument, historical validity, cultural custom, literary interpretation and so on—all without losing sight of the larger picture—reveals itself throughout every chapter. Readers are given the opportunity to explore their own interpretations when appropriate, and Kreider is never hasty (yes, he is patient!) to draw a weighty conclusion without demonstrating it repeatedly with the utmost thoroughness. This is a refreshing balance for a work that could have so easily made a rash detour at so many tricky intersections. Best of all, there are virtually no sentences that confuse, there are no chapter disconnected from another and there are carefully placed repetitions of key points for the convenience of all readers. If Kreider's work is not a prime example of 'first-rate scholarship'—and scholarship that also 'matters'—then I do not know what is.

The subject material also could not be more timely—and I am not referring to the situation mentioned in the opening paragraph of this review. Rather (and I do not mean to repeat some of the endorser's comments), the thought and practice of Christianity today is perhaps more fragmented and in need of reorientation than at any other period in history. This is not least because of the various destabilizing influences of late/post-modernity and the pluralist (and yet insipid) ethos of multicultural globalism. There is little hope for the church if it continually clings to trendy and shallow projections about itself. Kreider—or, rather, the early story of Christianity through his pen—powerfully reminds Christians who they really are and what they are on this planet to do.

*The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* is the publication of a lifetime. It merits the highest priority for any English speaker wanting

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to know what on earth Christianity is all about and also for those who are interested in second- and third-century church history. It is the first (and perhaps last) book that I have reviewed without a single complaint or quibble. The only exception would be directed at the publisher for not signature-binding. For a monograph that might as well have been Smyth-sewn in calfskin leather, it is a shame that the first printing boasts such a quotidian format. If the work sells, is translated and is distributed worldwide as it ought, perhaps the next printing will give the book the dignity it deserves.

Jamin Hübner  
John Witherspoon College  
Rapid City, South Dakota