

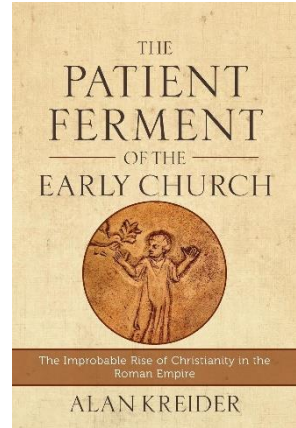
Alan Kreider. *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016. xiv + 321 pp. ISBN 978-0801048494. Paperback. \$26.99.

Violence is the product of a habitus of impatience.

So writes Alan Kreider in his recently-published study of early Christian history, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*. Impatience is the way of the world, and it characterized human interaction in the Roman world of antiquity as much as it does in our own today. It's what drives us to lie, to cheat, to steal, and to kill. We frantically grasp for what we want in fear of our own death that draws ever nearer.

There was something different about the early Christians, however—something that allowed them to grow, most unexpectedly, from a minor mystery religion on the outskirts of the Roman Empire to its dominant religion by the fifth century.

This thing which set them apart from the world around them was patience, a patience that springs forth from faith and hope and is modeled on the example of Christ. Impatience, the early Christians wrote, was at the heart of human sin and produced self-destructive violence. Patience, and therefore peace, however, was the fruit of faith and hope in the resurrection. Distinguishing his approach from scholars who argued that the dramatic rise of Christianity was due to the power of their ideas, or to psychological and physical force (namely Michael Green, Edward Gibbon, and Ramsay MacMullen), Kreider locates the source of early Christianity's appeal in the distinctive behavior of its adherents. He breaks this down into four interrelated factors which have heretofore been ignored by historians: patience, habitus, catechesis and worship, and ferment. He builds his case by establishing the importance of the virtue of patience in



early Christianity, demonstrating that for early Christians this patience necessarily had to be embodied (a *habitus*, a concept derived from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu). This *habitus*, we learn, was formed through lengthy catechesis followed by communal worship. As outsiders observed the distinctively patient behavior of their Christian neighbors, some were drawn to inquire about this unusual religion. And so Christianity grew, not by force but by ferment.

Kreider's first chapter establishes the surprising and unlikely growth of Christianity during the first three centuries, "despite the opposition of laws and social convention" (p. 8), despite little interest in missions and evangelism, and despite the churches' restricted access to baptized members only. The priority, rather, was living the patient model set forth by Christ. In stark contrast to the imperial world that viewed patience as a virtue suitable only for subordinates, Christians considered patience (the focus of chapter 2) to be the chief of all the virtues, and "crucial to their churches' life and growth" (p. 15). It was so important that three treatises were written on it: Tertullian's *On Patience* (*De patientia*; ca. 204), Cyprian's *On the Good of Patience* (*De bono patientiae*; ca. 256), and Augustine's *On Patience* (*De patientia*; ca. 417) (p. 14). Drawing from Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Lactantius, Kreider reveals widespread agreement that early Christians were to live out their faith by embodying patience, thereby emulating God's character as revealed through Jesus Christ and making it visible to those around them. Not only were words and deeds to match, behavior was even more important than words: Christianity is by its very nature incarnational. And so Christ-followers were to embody patience through trusting God during times of struggle and persecution, and also by interacting with others in nonviolent, noncoercive ways. They repudiated violence and killing in all its forms, including abortion, infanticide, capital punishment, gladiatorial games, and war.

In the third chapter, Kreider defines Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which is a "'corporeal knowledge,' a 'system of dispositions' that we carry

in our bodies," formed by social conventions, example, story, and repetition—and it, in turn, shapes our identity (p. 39). *Habitus* is extremely difficult to change, but not impossible, and a transformation of *habitus* is precisely what conversion to Christianity required. The Christian *habitus* then served to attract others by offering them something the empire couldn't: worth. Whereas Roman civic religion and pagan *collegia* served to reinforce the power of the state and its "steep social stratification" (p. 42), Christian behavior, particularly with respect to fictive kinship, effectively subverted empire. Christian associations challenged imperial power structures by accepting members from all strata of society, including women and slaves, any of whom could participate by offering a song, prayer, vision, scripture reading, or testimony (p. 61). Their love for one another spilled out of their worship services into the public arena, from providing compassionate care to victims of plague to their behavior as martyrs in the literal arena.

In chapter 4, Kreider argues that ordinary Christians were responsible for the spread and growth of Christianity, and they accomplished it simply by living their lives, which often required them to move to new locations for work, and by organically establishing new Christian communities in the process. Early Christianity was domestic: gatherings were frequent and took place in the home, and members shared their resources and treated one another as family. The domesticity of early Christian communities contributed largely toward developing the Christian *habitus* among its members, as well as making it visible to outsiders—specifically, their neighbors. Early Christianity, Kreider argues, was also a "women's movement," claiming that "from an early date the majority of Christians were women," and that their "greatest significance was their energetic involvement as community builders, providers of service, and practitioners of humble evangelism" (p. 83). For women, as marginalized members of Roman society, the message of the gospel was one of empowerment, of individual worth and dignity, and

their new Christian communities offered opportunities for them to exercise greater influence than what was available outside.

In chapter 5, we learn that early Christian communities ("when Christians were at their best") were distinctive for their sense of "a dynamic interplay between indigenizing and being pilgrim, between affirmation and critique" of the cultures in which they lived (p. 98). They understood that their "commitment to the local culture [was] clear but conditional" (p. 99). Out of love, they sought to allow the gospel to bring healing and flourishing to their cultures through restoration of wholeness to individuals and communities, and they did this through healing and exorcism, caring for the poor, and promoting peace through reconciliation and honest, ethical, and noncoercive behavior. Their ability to maintain an appropriate balance between indigenization and being pilgrim was due, likely, to the patient formation of habitus through catechesis and worship. As we read in chapter 6, the third-century *Apostolic Tradition* reveals that it was difficult to become a Christian, with the catechetical process leading up to baptism lasting possibly years, and entry into the community taking place only after scrutiny of the catechumen's habitus and character. As the early Christians viewed their behavior as the primary mode of evangelism, "admitting new people too quickly whose behavior compromised the Christians' distinctive attractiveness" would "undercut this approach to mission" (p. 149). Following catechesis, a new Christian could participate fully in worship, the focus of chapter 7. Early Christian worship served to transform habitus through example and bodily repetition; one of the most characteristic examples was interpersonal reconciliation expressed by the kiss of peace. Based on Jesus's instruction in Matthew 5:23-24, early Christians understood that reconciliation was nonnegotiable if prayer was to be accepted and effective.

In chapter 8, Kreider explores the picture of early Christian communities related to us through the third-century Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum*. The *Didascalia* reiterates the essential role of peace as a

precondition for worship and prayer. However, from the bishops' point of view, maintaining the peace increasingly resembled top-down control of the community. During the third century, it became evident that Christianity was gradually taking a turn toward greater indigenization, "making it more like the patriarchal Greco-Roman society" (p. 105). Communal evening meals were replaced by more formal morning services with tokenized elements, and in which the words spoken became increasingly monopolized by male clergy rather than shared by all in attendance. The worshipers no longer sat facing each other, but rather they began to sit in rows with women made to sit by themselves farthest from the bishops and presbyters—an arrangement "which can lead to a habitus of anonymity and inequality" (p. 192). This transition is reflected in the *Didascalia's* frustration regarding the activities of widows: they wandered between houses, interacting with others and sometimes receiving direct financial support. The widows also engaged in ministry by laying on hands and praying for people, as well as baptizing new converts. They were "uncoordinated, unauthorized, and out of control" (p. 238). In reaction, the *Didascalia* restricted the ministry of widows to the home "where they prayed and weaved wool under the authority of the bishops and presbyters" while their earlier roles of "visitation and outreach" were delegated to deaconesses. As Kreider tells us, "By the late fourth century, when women were still in the churches they were unequivocally under the authority of men...Their evangelistic verve and compassionate caregiving, so much a part of the life of the earlier Christians, had been stifled" (p. 106).

The *Didascalia* also reflects the shift in the focus of catechesis from the more difficult and lengthy task of developing Christlike behavior to the relatively quick and painless job of instilling orthodox belief—a transition from patience to expediency for the purposes of attracting and placating converts from the aristocracy (p. 239). The most famous of these was, of course, the emperor Constantine, the focus of chapter 9. To avoid the trouble of reforming his habitus, Constantine chose not to become a

catechumen or to be baptized until days before his death. Despite the best efforts of the theologian Lactantius, who in the *Divine Institutes* urged Constantine to rule with Christian patience by caring for the poor, rejecting all forms of killing, and defending religious liberty, Constantine chose to do things his own way. Constantine asserted that there was more than one type of habitus a Christian could adopt: he made exceptions for war, torture, capital punishment, religious coercion, and he even arranged for the executions of his son Crispus and his wife Fausta. From his impatient point of view, Christianity was to be advanced instrumentally through the power of the state, valuing "numbers more than lifestyle, rationality more than habitus" (p. 268). The shift in catechesis from behavior to orthodox belief became more entrenched under Constantine, thereby effecting the conversion of ambitious, impatient people to Christianity while converting Christianity from a nonviolent religion to one that allowed for anything deemed urgently necessary.

Constantine's influence also accelerated the widening gulf between clergy and laity, as bishops, "courted by the court, found it hard to keep their values or their habitus intact" (p. 279). Kreider imagines that the elevated social standing of clergy also made it increasingly difficult for them "to keep their biblical exegesis sound and their theological thinking straight" (p. 279), thereby introducing us in chapter 10 to the novel definition of Christian patience articulated by Augustine. Although not entirely without its merits, Augustine's *On Patience* was likely written "to justify his own impatience" (p. 283), using "love" to "justify strong-armed policies—state-imposed fines, confiscation, and exile—that seemed urgently necessary to him" to combat "heresy" (p. 285). Beginning with Constantine and continuing under Augustine, we witness the development of a two-tiered Christian ethic: patience was only for those specially called to religious vocation, not for laypeople. It was not only permissible, but also desirable, according to Augustine, for political rulers to exercise force in pursuing such "Christian ends" as an empire unified by faith (p. 295). As Kreider points out, Augustine's perspective was the

fruit of unchecked indigenization: it was concerned only with an inward disposition, not behavior, and so "patience no longer functioned...as a countercultural habitus to be formed by catechesis" (p. 290).

This book tells the story of how the Christian habitus transformed during the first four centuries "from patient ferment" to "impatient force," which has led many to the not-unwarranted "assumption that...in its essence Christianity is violent, and that Christian mission—however loving its professed intentions—is essentially an exercise in imperialism" (p. 296). If we Christians wish to reclaim our "lost bequest" of patient nonviolence, Kreider counsels, then our response must be a patient one: to seek "the reformation of our habitus by the work of the Holy Spirit and by catechesis rooted in the teaching and way of Jesus" (p. 296). In an environment in which Christian worship services are often designed to be "seeker-sensitive," in which missions and evangelism are pursued with instrumentality, in which the number of new converts who pray the sinner's prayer is considered more important than either character formation or theological instruction, it seems, not surprisingly, that American evangelical Christians have fully embraced the two-tiered ethic of Constantine and Augustine in their approach toward politics and their favored politicians. As white Protestants, including evangelicals, are on the decline in America's religious landscape,¹ their instinctive response seems to be an increased focus on evangelism in both the street and the sanctuary, as well as an increase in political activism with the goal of "putting God back in government/our schools/society" via legislation.

However, Kreider's study indicates that this approach, much like Augustine's desperate and incontinent grasping for control (p. 290), is self-defeating, just as Tertullian and Lactantius observed of all violence. Augustine's sense of urgency in combating heresy gave way to concessions and compromises, "practical measures" that he deemed

¹ "America's Changing Religious Identity," Public Religion Research Institute, published September 6, 2017, <https://www.prrri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

permissible due to extenuating circumstances—but these "exceptions" always become the norm—habitus (p. 295, note 66). Thus the very nature of Christianity has changed—the salt has lost its saltiness, and is now good for nothing (Mt 5:13). Accordingly, it is self-destructive for Christians to utilize impatient means, such as government force, to accomplish what they believe to be godly goals. The ends and means are inseparable: the only way to achieve God's purposes is to truly be remade in the image of Christ, who did not draw a distinction between God's Word and his own behavior, but rather embodied it completely.

Kreider's metaphor of fermentation is borrowed from scripture: Jesus uses the analogy of yeast to explain the growth of both the kingdom of heaven as well as the toxic teachings of the Pharisees (Mt 13:33; 16:5-12). In microbiology, fermentation is the process by which certain microorganisms, deprived of oxygen, metabolize glucose. Because it's not as efficient as respiration, the growth is slower and more subtle—at first, but as these organisms can thrive without oxygen, they are capable of working their way throughout the entire medium, changing its character as they go: "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (Gal 5:9, NRSV). An invisible process that takes place on the microscopic level and beneath the surface, it only becomes evident as the organisms produce gas that creates cracks and fissures in the agar, or causes the bread to rise and the beer to bubble, meanwhile altering the pH or alcohol content of their environment. Just as the type of yeast determines whether you end up with an ale or a lager, so also imperceptible factors have huge potential to change our character without our conscious awareness of it. We might interpret Jesus's warning at Matthew 16:5-12 thus: If we aren't vigilant, the yeast of the world will find its way in and slowly transform Christians' habitus of patience back to our former impatient, violent habitus. Not surprisingly, we discover, Jesus's admonition was lamentably prescient. Yet this book provides a message of hope – hope that despite all outward appearances, there is still a remnant whose task is to remain true to their

calling, and God is using them to work beneath the surface, to change hearts and minds and save the world.

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