

# LuxMundi 32

No 1 March 2013

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# Introduction

In December 2011, students and lecturers at the Theological University of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken<sup>1</sup> (CGK) at Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, together tackled the theme of 'Strangers and pilgrims'. This event was part of the *integrative lectures*, as they have been called, in which a theme is discussed from as many theological lines of approach as possible.



We encounter the term 'strangers and pilgrims' ['sojourners' in some translations] in three different passages in the New Testament, namely Ephesians 2:19, Hebrews 11: 13 and 1 Peter 2: 11. In the last two texts this phrase characterizes the position of the Christian congregation in the world back then. When Christianity became the dominant religion in the Fourth century, something changed. It became normal to belong to the church, and being a Christian become the standard. How different is our situation today! Now it seems as if this era is coming to an end, or has already ended.

During the aforementioned days of study, we asked ourselves what makes being a stranger so typically characteristic of the church, and whether we have not perhaps forgotten – to our own detriment - that it is also true of a church in the majority that its citizenship is not here on earth, but in heaven.

In this issue you will find five articles regarding this theme, almost all of them derived from lectures that were held during this period of study.

The first contribution is by *Dr A. Baars*, Professor of Practical Theology, presenting an extensive and balanced overview of the situation in the period of the early church.

Subsequently, *Dr H.G.L. Peels*, Professor of Old Testament, analyses a text concerning a situation of 'foreignership' in the Old Testament, namely the letter written to the exiles in Babylon by the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29). The following contribution is the only one that was not held during the study period, but which we are pleased to include because of the importance of its subject.

*Dr T.M. Hofman*, Professor of New Testament, takes us back to the place where the early Christians lived: their house(hold), and the way in which it was in many ways linked to the house of God.

*Dr G.C. den Hertog*, Professor of Systematic Theology, then tackles the question of the approach to ethical questions in the early centuries, and what we can learn from this for the present practice of ethics.

In the final article, *J. van 't Spijker*, Assistant Professor of Missiology and Evangelism, approaches the theme from a missionary perspective and poses the question whether we have gone 'back to square one'.<sup>2</sup> ■

#### Notes:

- 1 Christian Reformed Churches
- 2 The contributions in this magazine were originally published in the Dutch language in: G.C. den Hertog & H.G.L. Peels (eds.), *Vreemdelingen en bijwoners. Opstellen rond een urgent theologisch thema*, Apeldoorn 2012.



A. Baars

# The Lesson of Four Mirrors Some thoughts about the spirituality of sojourning in the Early Church

We often hear it said that the way of the church in this postmodern era strongly reminds us of the situation of the early church within the pagan world of the Roman Empire. In many respects, this is so. Still, we ought not to forget that there is at least one important difference. When Christian churches came into being, Christian faith and life was new and foreign to the dominant cultural and religious climate of the time. Among the great variety of religious movements within the empire, Christians were a completely new and strange phenomenon. The rise of Christianity evoked strong reactions, ranging from contempt and resistance to curiosity and attraction.



In our postmodern culture, the situation is radically different. The Europe that was previously 'Christian' has become strongly secularised. In the minds of most people, the Christian faith does not present anything new or challenging any more. It is well and truly out of date, a dying flame that is best forgotten as quickly as possible. In any case, it does not have the slightest attraction for them any more.

It is important to keep this firmly in mind when we attempt to mirror ourselves in the spirituality of the early church. After all, a mirror can give a sharp, perhaps confronting image; however, it can also have a distorting, even an alienating effect. When the church and the Christian faith of today observe themselves in mirrors of the early church, these effects will certainly be present.

Still, looking carefully into these mirrors for a while is a worth the effort. It can be quite instructive, both for correction and for encouragement.

Whenever we consider the spirituality of the being strangers and sojourners' within the context of the early church, we can discern four mirrors:

- Forced sojourning
- Attractive sojourning
- Extreme sojourning
- Ritual sojourning

## About the author:

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## ■ Forced sojourning

It is fair to say that the testimony of Scripture compelled or at stimulated early Christians to live as sojourners in this world. Many passages in the Bible exhort believers to be 'not of this world', to go through this life as 'strangers and sojourners' (ESV). However, early Christians were also driven by force of circumstance into the isolation of being sojourners. Quite early, the citizens of the Roman Empire began to view Christians with unease and suspicion.

Describing the persecutions of Christians under emperor Nero, the well-known Roman historian Tacitus writes that Christians were accused of 'hatred of mankind'. This imputation highlights the fact that Christians were radically different. Within the prevailing social, cultural and religious climate of the day, they occupied a position so exceptional that they were regarded as enemies of the state. This also was the chief reason why Christians suffered such severe persecution – to the point of being tortured and even executed – within the Roman Empire.

It must be said that during the first centuries, these persecutions were not always equally severe. There were lengthy periods when Christians were able to live in relative peace. In addition, the persecutions often varied in intensity from region to region: in some parts of the empire, Christians were generally left alone, while in others their lives were often in danger. The most severe persecutions, occurring across the breadth of the empire, took place around the middle of the third and at the beginning of the fourth centuries AD. During these times, literally thousands of Christians suffered torture and were put to death.

## 'Hatred of Mankind'

What were the chief causes of this hatred and persecution directed against Christians? I already referred to the most significant charge levelled at Christians: the charge of 'hatred of mankind'. Prevailing opinion held that this hatred was evident in the withdrawal of Christians from important





spheres of social, cultural and religious life. The New Testament already shows that Christians refused to take part in meals that included meat sacrificed to the idols. In addition, there were the numerous gladiatorial contests, sporting events and stage performances that were a completely indispensable part of public life. For Christians, the chief ground for their refusal to participate in these activities was the fact that they were all saturated with pagan idolatry. The philosopher Celsus, in a well-known and hostile treatise against Christians, wrote that they also failed to join in the defence of the empire when it was in danger of attack by barbarians. Christians refused to serve in the army, and were even hesitant to fill administrative roles. It is true that early Christians saw the filling of certain positions in government or the military as incompatible with their faith. That should not be surprising, since the highest official positions, and certainly military service, were very closely connected to the veneration of Roman state deities, and the Caesar cult.

Another important factor that led to the persecution of Christians was that they were generally regarded as 'atheists'. In that time, 'atheism' was something different from what we presently understand it to be. Today, atheism is understood to be a conscious refusal to believe in the existence of a (personal) God. In the time of the early church, 'atheism' was especially applied to people who were unwilling to participate in

the veneration of the deities that were locally worshipped, in the city-state, region or kingdom in which one lived. In extreme cases, people made a public display of their refusal. The local population generally perceived the presence of these 'atheists' as a great danger. After all, the security and wellbeing of the community depended on the protection and favour of the local and regional gods. Should these deities discover that there were people in their region who refused to worship them, they were likely to withdraw their protection and, in their wrath, send all kinds of disasters and calamities upon the community. If the gods were angry, peace and prosperity would vanish as snow in the sun, to be overtaken by social disturbances, earthquakes or war.

### **Tolerant**

In this light, it is quite understandable that Roman emperors generally were quite tolerant of all kinds of religions, provided its adherents did not completely distance themselves from the Roman state deities, especially the divine protective spirit of the emperor. Those who refused to offer sacrifices to the gods of the state were, in fact, a threat to the peace and prosperity of the empire, and were regarded as enemies of the state. Hence, the accusation of 'atheism' had serious implications, and could easily inflame popular fury against Christians. The acerbic words of the church father Tertullian are well known: *"If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send*

*its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, 'The Christians to the lions!'"*

The final accusation levelled against Christians was that they were thought to be guilty of cannibalism and incest. This was connected with the fact that the Christian community appeared to be very closed to outsiders. This 'secretiveness' was deeply intriguing to non-Christians, and often brought with it extremely negative consequences. Many people supposed that Christians secretly practised the ritual killing and eating of small children (cannibalism) and all kinds of sexual perversions, including incest.

The exact background of these accusations is hard to track down. Most likely, however, they were the result of persistent and malicious rumour-mongering, which included the following. The dreadful accusation that Christians would ritually slaughter their children, dip bread in their blood and then eat it, can easily be explained as a (deliberate) distortion of the accounts that circulated about the celebration of the Holy Supper. The charges of indulging in a variety of sexual perversions, most notably incest, could be related to the fact that Christians called each other 'brother' and 'sister', and greeted each other with 'a holy kiss'. These Christian practices were then misunderstood and completely distorted in the public imagination. This whole complex of rumours was extremely widespread, and caused much harm to Christians. After all, in the Greco-Roman culture of the time, sexual promiscuity, incest and cannibalism were regarded as the most extreme manifestations of barbarism.

When we mirror ourselves in this complex of ideas, there are at least two things to be learned.

In the first place, it is clear that in this world Christians must expect to encounter contempt, disgrace, and (false) accusations. These experiences do not just happen by chance; they are part and parcel of what the church of Christ experiences through the ages..

Moreover, the early Christians show us that they were willing, for love of Christ, to bring great sacrifices, if necessary to give up their lives. This is consistent with the teaching of Scripture that the willingness to make sacrifices is one of the chief features of Christian love. Love demands that believers deny themselves the for sake of the Other, for the sake of others, for the sake of the Kingdom,

and for the sake of one's personal salvation. This motif confronts us with the question, so many centuries later, and in a self-centred and materialistic western culture: "What are we willing to give up for His sake?"

## ■ Attractive sojourning

During the first centuries of the church, the pressure of persecution made it increasingly difficult to proclaim the Gospel openly, as the books of Acts extensively recounts. Preaching in the synagogues, philosophers' schools and marketplaces is gradually silenced, because the lives of the preachers are increasingly in danger. Nevertheless, the church continued to exert a strongly attractive influence during this period. How could this come about?

During this period, the Christian faith is propagated, not so much through overt evangelistic activity, and much less through a well-worked out strategy of missionary activities. Instead, Christianity gains in influence largely through personal interactions between Christians and those in their immediate surroundings, and through a way of living that for some leads to martyrdom.

### Household

To begin with, the *household* is often the place where people first hear the gospel, and where they might also come to faith. When the man of the house – the head of the family – becomes a Christian, the whole household generally is converted to the faith (see Acts 10:24ff, 10:44ff, 16:32ff). A believing wife, through her way of living, might become the means through which her husband is won for Christ (1 Corinthians 7:11ff; 1 Peter 3:1ff). Slaves, freedmen and family friends may, in this way, come to faith. Conversely, they might also become the means through which the Gospel comes into the household.

A second avenue might be conversations with neighbours, in the marketplace or in the bathhouse. In the works of the early church fathers there are numerous references to these personal contacts, and their contribution to the spread of the Gospel. Even Celsus, a fierce opponent of Christianity, mockingly observes: "*We see how in private homes woolworkers, cobblers, fullers, in short the most uncivilized country bumpkins, dare not say or do anything in the presence of their elders and wiser masters. But whenever they get hold of children separately, along with foolish women as ignorant as*



*themselves, they begin to spout the most astonishing things: 'Do not heed your father or your teachers. Listen to us, instead! They are foolish and stupid. They have no knowledge of what is truly good, nor can they perform it, since their minds are occupied with the most senseless trifles. We alone know how men ought to live', they say, and with more such nonsense they persuade them."*

Of course, these words are inspired by an implacable hostility towards the Christian faith. Still, they show clearly how – in the eyes of their opponents – the Gospel is spread through personal contacts. Celsus even expresses the fear that in this manner the whole world might one day become Christian!

Thirdly, we ought not to forget that contacts of this kind also took place on a larger scale. It is well-known that all kinds of 'new religions' were propagated in a similar manner throughout the empire by travelling merchants, and by others whose circumstances made it easy to move from place to place (slaves, soldiers, etc.). This was also the manner in which the Christian faith spread from one regional centre to another.

### **Not just in words**

Finally, early Christians propagated their faith, not just in words, but especially in their deeds and way of living. We think of their love and acts of charity, demonstrated in their alms for the poor, support of widows and orphans, care for the sick, the weak and those unable to work, and their concern for slaves and prisoners. These acts of charity made Christians stand out as 'strangers and sojourners' in an increasingly hardening Roman society. At the

same time, this charity was a significant element in their spirituality. Writing about the mutual love of Christians, and the response of pagans to it, Tertullian says: "*But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See', they say, 'how they love one another', for themselves are animated by mutual hatred; 'how they are ready even to die for one another', for they themselves will sooner put to death."*

This love becomes concretely visible in the diaconal care for those in need, or those less fortunate, within the church. The '*least of the brothers and sisters*' (Matthew 25:40) are regularly visited, and often generously supported. Moreover, these acts of charity are not confined to those inside the congregation; they also extend to non-Christians, be it to a lesser extent. The rule of Scripture is clearly applied: '*Let us do good to all men, but especially to those who belong to the family of believers*' (Galatians 6:10).

This mirror, too, provides us with at least two opportunities for reflection. To begin with, we must ask ourselves whether we use every possible opportunity to spread the Good News of the Gospel: in our families, in our recreational pursuits, among our friends and in our workplaces. Of course, it is an excellent thing to develop missionary strategies and establish missionary churches. However, if we think that this fulfils our missionary calling, then our activity is actually distinctly 'unmissionary'. Besides, we should never underestimate the effect of 'witness without words'. Of the early church it was said: 'they are persecuted, and still they love.' That exerted a powerful appeal. We could possibly say of the Reformed world today: 'They are deeply divided, they don't radiate love; hence they

have lost all attractive influence'. For centuries, this mirror on the wall has asked: "Is this a fair comment?"

## ■ Extreme sojourning

In the course of the fourth century, a profound and pivotal change occurred in the church. Prior to 311AD, the Christian faith was an unacceptable religion – it deserved to be destroyed root and branch. From that year onward, Christianity became an 'authorized' religion within the Roman empire. Not long after that, it became a 'favoured' religion, and eventually it was proclaimed the state religion of the Roman Empire.

The role of emperor Constantine (c.290-337AD) was quite central to this development. As a result, from 311AD onwards, many joined the Christian Church 'for a living': being a Christian conferred social and economic advantage. In consequence, all kinds of pagan practices were often repackaged and 'Christianized'. Consciously or unconsciously, the church quickly and thoroughly accommodated itself to prevailing Roman culture.

How did the leaders of the church and principled Christians respond to this development? An extreme reaction to this increasing worldliness was a radical withdrawal by hermits and early monks. There were already Christian hermits before the fourth century, but from Constantine's time onward, they increased greatly in number. It was in this time that Anthony, the renowned Egyptian hermit, retreated into a life of solitude in the desert to devote himself to God. The church father Athanasius, none less, wrote an impressive and influential biography of this man.

Why would such people seek the solitude and isolation of the desert? There were several reasons. On the one hand, the desert was exalted as a pristine place, far from the corruption of city life. It was a place where one was not exposed to the numerous temptations that came through interpersonal relationships; in unspoiled nature, one could live closer to God.

There was, however, another side to this. The wilderness was regarded as an abode of demons, inhabited by dangerous wildlife: snakes, hyenas, jackals and the like. In the writings of the hermits, such creatures were often associated with the devil. This literature highlighted the great struggle with the Evil One and his demons that hermits must undertake in the wilderness, before they could

enter into the paradisiacal rest of union with God. In other words: the hermetic life was seen as one of complete devotion to God, including a radical turning away from this world and a life-and-death battle against evil powers around and within us.

## Pillar saints

We encounter the most extreme – and bizarre – forms of hermetic life in the *stylites*, or pillar saints, in Syria during the fourth and fifth centuries AD. Along the pilgrims' way to Aleppo there stood a number of pillars, each of which was topped by a platform of just a few square metres. Hermits such as Simeon Stylites spent 37 or more years atop such pillars, day and night. They ate very little, in some cases just one meagre meal a week. In order to prevent the temptations that the sight of women might bring, the pillar stood in a fenced enclosure, to which only men were admitted. Women must remain outside the gate, and any requests they might have were passed on by men. This period saw the rise of a kind of 'pillar-saint-tourism': great crowds of pilgrims travelled from hermit to hermit, to gain answers to their questions and to receive their blessings

As we look into this mirror, a feeling of estrangement creeps up on us: this was not what the New Testament meant when it described the believers' sojourning. We could never withdraw from the world in this way. On the other hand, we are inescapably confronted with the question: "What does it mean, then, to be 'in this world, but not of this world', or: 'do not be conformed to this world' (Romans 12:2)?" In addition, the question forces itself upon us: "How can we, in a world filled with visual and verbal tumult, find a place of silence to draw near to God (Matthew 6:6)?"

## ■ Ritual sojourning

When, beginning with Constantine's reign, the church becomes more and more worldly, another reaction manifests itself: it becomes increasingly difficult to join the church. Stricter demands are imposed upon catechumens, those who desire to prepare for baptism, and be received into the church.

Cyril of Jerusalem (c.313-386), a prominent writer of his time, describes the process as follows: as a rule, those who wish to be baptized must first undergo an extensive period of catechesis. Once this instruction is complete, they formally present their request for baptism at the beginning of Lent. At



this point, they subject themselves to a searching examination concerning the motives for their request. This is followed by an intensive course of daily catechesis, in which the Creed is expounded. Halfway through this course, there is a solemn ceremony, during which the full text of the Creed is recited and impressed upon them – before this moment, they still do not know its literal text. On the night of Easter, the catechumens are baptised, and required to give explicit assent to the Creed: in effect, public profession of faith. In the week after Easter, further intensive catechesis follows. This time, attention is paid to the Lord’s Prayer, with the intention that this will prepare the newly baptised member for their first celebration of the Holy Supper. This takes place on the first Sunday after Easter.

### **‘Mysteries’**

A few things stand out for us when we consider this process. First, we learn that matters such as profession of faith, baptism and the Holy Supper are regarded as ‘mysteries’. They are not simply accessible to all and sundry. This emphasizes that ‘what is holy’ should not be ‘thrown to the dogs’ (Matthew 7:6). A powerful confirmation of this principle is found in the fact that guests and those not yet baptized were not allowed to be present as the Holy Supper was celebrated. They were required to leave the worship service before this took place. Second, it becomes clear that admission to membership of the church is not a mere formality, a matter of course. It requires sound instruction in doctrine and in the practice of a sanctified life. It is important that those admitted freely and sincerely submit themselves to the demands and the promises of the Word of God.

When we look into this mirror, there may be ‘condensation’ that could somewhat blur its reflection for us. In any case, we ought not to think that in the early church catechesis was intended to discourage people from joining the congregation. On the contrary, everyone was welcome, for the grace of Christ is offered freely to every sinner. At the same time, it emphasized that joining the church required a real commitment. Here, the mirror becomes crystal clear. Should we ever begin to weaken the ongoing need for catechesis, and the need for an unequivocal confession to remain faithful to the Word, the doctrine of the church, and the fellowship of the congregation, then we begin to distance ourselves from the church of our fathers.

We can put it more strongly: we would distance ourselves from the Word of the living God, and associate ourselves with the strange ideas of postmodern wanderers and seekers.

In this connection, we are faced with an urgent question: We often plead for worship services that are accessible and have a low threshold for outsiders. From a missionary perspective, this plea is understandable and in many ways justified. At the same time, we should also ask: “To what extent does the church still stand guard for the mysteries of God and His Word, as pure and reliable spiritual food for believers?” It is conceivable that we might, in misplaced missionary fervour, downgrade what is holy and accommodate ourselves entirely to the needs and feelings of postmodern humanity. It seems to me that these mirrors of the sojourning of the early church might well teach us a thing or two.

### **Notes**

- 1 Translator’s note: In the original article, the author uses the term ‘vreemdelingschap’ to denote a state of being ‘strangers and sojourners’ in the place where one lives. There is no direct equivalent to this term in English. In this translation, the term ‘sojourning’ is used in this sense. This translation by Aart Plug, with the permission of the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), 1984 edition

# Praying as foreigners in Babylon

## An exegesis of Jeremiah 29: 4-7

A passage from the Old Testament that provides a clear insight into being a foreigner and stranger is Jeremiah 29: a very special prophecy by letter. Verses 4 – 7 make up the central section of this chapter, and it is on these that we would like to briefly focus.



In order to understand this letter from Jeremiah it is necessary to give a concise description of the historical setting (§ 1), followed by a literary positioning (§ 2). The principal part of this contribution will consist of a brief exegesis of the verses 4-7 (§ 3). In the following paragraph we will summarize the whole and follow the lines we have drawn further to New Testament times and to our present day (§ 4). In conclusion we would like to reflect on how it is possible that an imprecation in Psalm 137 concerning Babylon can comply with the prayer to bless Babylon, which the prophet Jeremiah enjoins in Jeremiah 29 (§ 5).

### 1. Historical setting

The facts, names and places mentioned in Jeremiah 29:2-3 take us back to the height of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (605-539 BC). Between 605 and 587 the end approached for the people of Judah as an independent entity, for the Davidic monarchy, for the city of Jerusalem, and especially for the temple, the pulsating heart of Israel's faith and life. It is not without good reason that Jeremiah is often portrayed as 'the weeping prophet' seated on the ruins of Jerusalem. The Book of Jeremiah shows God's people splitting into three groups: a) the core, the elite, who are captured and taken into exile to Babylon; b) the large majority of the people ('the people of the land') who stay behind in Judah, and c) a large group that travels voluntarily to exile in Egypt, forcing the prophet Jeremiah to accompany them. The tension between the expectations of and the perspective for these three groups is what determines the Book of Jeremiah, the principal message being that the future of God's people lies not in Judah, nor in Egypt, but in Babylon. Babylon, which was the metropolis of the arch-enemy that had destroyed God's people, land, city, and temple.

#### About the author:

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There is some discussion about the precise date of this letter by Jeremiah. Did the prophet send his message to the exiles shortly after they had arrived in Babylon following the first surrender of Jerusalem in 597? It is more plausible to think of the period around 595, when Nebuchadnezzar's power seemed to be diminishing due to internal tension and threats from outside. It is in these times that hope of liberation and return would flare up among the exiles from Judah. Jeremiah makes use of the diplomatic correspondence between the court in Jerusalem and the King of Babylon (v. 3) in order to send this letter.

Did King Zedekiah on this occasion perhaps wish to give an extra demonstration of his loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar? However it may be, when reading Jeremiah 29 we should constantly keep in view the situation of the Jewish exiles in Babylon. We are speaking of the elite of the Jewish people, to which the list in the verses 1-2 testifies. Although they have been forced to leave everything behind, they have not lost all hope. The temple still stands, and there is still a king on the throne of David in Jerusalem. In Judah as well as in Babylon there are prophets still at work, predicting in the name of YHWH that the exile will be over within two years (Hananiah in Jeremiah 28:3). So there! But then the letter from Jeremiah arrives in Babylon...

### 2. Literary positioning

In the Book of Jeremiah, chapter 29 stands at a crossroads, as it were, in a transitional position. Themes from former chapters, particularly from Jeremiah 24 onwards, return here, as can be seen in the many idiomatic and thematic correspondences. The threats proclaimed in the former prophecies have now become reality. The 'enemy from the north', which had received the face of Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah 25, *has* come. A part of the people has in fact been taken into exile to Babylon, just as Jeremiah had been prophesying for years. God's judgment has commenced. At the same time, we see how in Jeremiah 29, next to the theme of doom and judgment, another theme is being broadly illustrated: that of salvation and a future for God's people. While there had been talk of this a few times earlier in the Book of Jeremiah – God would not leave his people in exile forever (e.g.

12:15, 16:15, 23:8, 24:6) – Jeremiah’s letter strongly underlines and unfolds this theme. In Jeremiah 29, the formula ‘I will bring you back from captivity...’ is used for the first time. This formula is repeated in the following section (Jer. 30-33) no less than seven times. The message of Jeremiah 29 in particular forms the prelude to the magnificent ‘book of comfort by Jeremiah’, Chapters 30 and 31, which lie at the heart of the Book of Jeremiah, both literally and theologically.

At the same time, Jeremiah 29 is part of the smaller entity of Jeremiah 26-29, chapters in which the confrontation between ‘true’ and ‘false’ prophecy plays a principal role. These passages do not stem from the same period of time (Jer.26 is set in the period of King Jehoiakim’s reign [26:1], whereas the other chapters are from the period of king Zedekiah [27:1, 28:1, 29:3], yet they have the same theme). The message of Jeremiah’s letter conflicts with the soothing comfortable predictions given by the ‘false’ prophets in Babylon (29:8ff, 15, 21-23), which could mislead the exiles. One of these prophets is Shemaiah, who, in reaction to Jeremiah’s letter, advises the rulers in Jerusalem to imprison him (29:24-29), whereupon Jeremiah receives the divine command to write a new letter to the exiles, unmasking Shemaiah as a false prophet and passing judgment on him (29:30-32).

### 3. Exegesis in outline

#### **Verse 4** *‘This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:’*

Jeremiah’s letter opens emphatically with a double title of divinity: YHWH Z<sup>e</sup>bā’ôt (tentatively translated as ‘Lord Almighty’) and ‘Elohê Yisrā’êl (‘the God of Israël’). The same combination can be found another three times in this letter. This can be no coincidence. Two things are being put forward by this: a) that YHWH is unchangeably the Almighty, the Governor of all (cf. 27:5), including in Babylon, and b) that YHWH is and remains the God of Israel, also in Babylon. The use of these divine titles contains a message of deep comfort –if only because of the fact that God presents himself in *such* a way to the exiles! God is still speaking, and to *his* people at that.

Something more fundamental is also said very directly in this opening verse, when we take note of the use of the first person singular: that ‘I carried / allowed to be carried away into exile’. With this it

is emphasized at the very beginning of the letter that the exile into Babylon is not some dark fate but clearly a judgment. At the same time, this contains an element of comfort: God has not let the situation get out of hand; it did not take him by surprise. On the contrary, this bold prophecy proclaims that YHWH himself had his hand in it all. Not unfathomable fate or doom but the finger of God determines the history of God’s people.

#### **Verse 5** *‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.’*

The actual message is given in verse 5 with a list of imperatives. Two possible states of mind among the exiles are cut short by these instructions:

- a) a short-term and dangerous optimism: ‘it won’t last long, just a short while and we will be returning’ (cf. 28:3ff ‘Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord’s house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon.’) 456
- b) a feeling of dull and fatalistic resignation: ‘all is now lost, there is nothing we can do’. Jeremiah’s letter opposes such feelings. On the one hand it appeals to them to pick up their lives again, to get organized again after the catastrophe, and roll up their sleeves and get to work. On the other hand it appeals to them to invest in the future: ‘building’, ‘planting’, ‘living’ are verbs directed at a long-term stay. He who plants fruit trees must wait patiently for many years before he can enjoy the fruit of his work.

At the same time this opening sentence contains a deeper message. The words used here reverse the old covenant curse of Deuteronomy 28:30: ‘You will be pledged to be married to a woman, but another will take her and rape her. You will build a house, but you will not live in it. You will plant a vineyard, but you will not even begin to enjoy its fruit.’ Implicitly, Jeremiah’s appeal proclaims that there is life after judgment, and that there will be an end to the curse of the covenant that was violated by Israel.

Read in the broad context of the whole book, the opening words of Jeremiah’s letter become even more significant. These words refer to the basic theme of the Book of Jeremiah. In the vision in which Jeremiah received his calling we read the prophetic command: ‘See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant’ (1:10).

The first four verbs in this prophecy have a bearing on verdict and judgment, the last two on salvation and restoration. These six verbs convey the message that is the connecting theme throughout the book. In the first part of the Book of Jeremiah the 'uprooting' and the 'extermination' were the central theme, while now, in Jeremiah's letter, the words 'building' and 'planting' are directed concretely at the people for the first time. They may be far away in a foreign country, yet it is actually the time to start the building and planting – for YHWH is making a new beginning! Here lies the turning point in the dramatic course of the history of Israel. God changes the 'full stop' of his judgment into the 'comma' of his grace – the history with this people, the history of salvation, continues along the *via Babylonica*. God will not let his people be destroyed. He has 'thoughts' that reach much further.

***Verse 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.***

Verse 6 elaborates on the content of verse 5. The charge is to put this building and planting into practice also along the line of the generations: increasing as opposed to decreasing. This verse also brings to mind Israel's stay in Egypt. In situations of emergency, people often abstain from this type of 'building'. Was not Jeremiah's own life a sign of this? He was unmarried and therefore without children. All this was a living proclamation of God's judgment over Israel: there is no future for the disobedient people of God. All the more significant therefore is this command in the letter to the exiles, which points in a very different direction. Being able to build for the future is a sign of God's grace and salvation.

***Verse 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."***

The word pair 'seeking and praying' is cultic language for seeking God and finding him in the temple of Jerusalem. In this verse the same word pair is applied concerning the attitude towards Babylon. The exiles can no longer go to the temple, yet religious life continues. The exiles must exert themselves towards the wellbeing of *this* city. If it goes well with Babylon, it will go well with

them. The reverse is also true: if it does not go well in Babylon, this will soon affect the exiles. Implicitly, therefore, the way of resignation or revolution is rejected, and an appeal is made to a positive commitment, while preserving their own identity. This appeal is misunderstood where it is understood merely as the result of purely utilitarian motives. On the contrary, it contains a deeply religious element, namely bowing to God's will and coming to terms with the consequences of God's judgment.

In an initial reading of chapter 29, Jeremiah's letter comes across as rather calm and reasonable, as a down-to-earth encouragement to start building up life once more. But to the original recipients this letter must have been shocking, for at least three reasons:

- a. The exiles from Judah are completely robbed of their hope for a speedy return and restoration of normal life. The letter even opens up the possibility of having to live in Babylon for up to *three* generations (v. 6).
- b. The summons to pray for Babylon must have sounded outrageous, even blasphemous, to the ears of the Jewish exiles. How could a devout Jew pray for this heathen, unclean city? This is comparable to the revulsion that Jonah felt against the salvation of the city of Nineveh. Does the Torah not say that it is forbidden to admit an Ammonite or Moabite into the congregation, and that Israel should never 'seek' prosperity or 'peace' for them? (Deut 23:6). The exact same word pair returns here in Jeremiah's letter, but now positively for the godless city of Babylon
- c. The most aggravating part, however, is the summons to pray for the ruthless executors. Babylon is the arch-enemy, preparing the downfall of Judah while murdering and plundering, later torturing and exiling Judah's last king, Zedekiah, and trampling and destroying God's own house.

Three times Jeremiah was forbidden to pray for his own people of Israel (Jer. 7:16, 11:14, 14:11). What the prophet is denied, the exiles must do – pray, not for themselves, but for the enemy city of Babylon. Here the Book of Jeremiah touches a chord that sounds a deep tone, which can be heard resonating to the full in the New Testament at the cross of Calvary.

A letter with an amazing message – yet this is the letter that the prophet Jeremiah must send in the



name of YHWH to his people that are lost, or so it seems. The letter therefore continues with the sharp summons *not* to listen to the message of a speedy return, which false prophets, sorcerers, and dreamers are preaching to the people in Babylon (29:8). In the midst of their alienation, Israel must distance itself completely from the preaching of ‘easy grace’, and let itself be completely won over by the deep perspective of God’s plan of salvation: his merciful thoughts, his appeals to repent, his future (29:10-14): “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” This is the supporting foundation under Jeremiah’s oh-so-shocking message in 29:4-7. The mystery of the history of salvation: God’s goodness and patience, leading from Calvary to the New Jerusalem.

#### 4. Following these lines further

Being foreigners and aliens means for the exiles that they place their fate in the hands of God and receive their life from his hand, in order to adopt a positive attitude, to apply themselves in calm dedication to the wellbeing of all those around them, waiting quietly for God’s coming salvation. Not least in their prayers. We can follow this line of living as strangers in Babylon into the New Testament, where the same message resounds in passages such as Matt. 5:44ff and 1 Tim. 2:1-4. Especially in times when alienation is being experienced, God’s people may draw from a double fountain of comfort and hope:

God will always be there for us, even in a strange country, even when we are bereft of all the security of longstanding religious forms (the temple!) and

traditions. “Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity.” (Jer. 29:12-14).

We can always fall back on the gospel hope that God’s thoughts are higher than ours, far above our abilities and knowledge, and that one day he will bring all his people home. All exiles, strangers, and aliens – not one will be missing. “Then I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” (Jer. 29:14b).

The church, foreign in the world of AD 2013, cannot seek shelter in fruitless isolation. Christians do not submit to passivism and resignation or to rebellion and negativism. The church takes a positive attitude within its own context so as to build up and be savoury salt, to seek prosperity and peace for all around her – going against the grain of temptation and opposition. In this the church should realize that the time of living as foreigners is a transitional time. The here and now is not all there is. This life as a foreigner is clearly defined. The seventy years for Babylon will pass (Jer. 29:10), and this world will also pass (1 Corinthians 7:31). Which means Christians should on the one hand be building houses and planting gardens, but on the other hand not hammering their tent pegs too firmly into the ground.

#### 5. Prayer contra prayer?

The prophet Jeremiah appealed to the Jewish exiles to pray for Babylon. Did this actually take place, and if so, what did these prayers sound like? What words did the exiles choose when responding to the call in Jeremiah’s letter? In the Psalter we find a specific example of a prayer by Jewish exiles in Babylon for the city in which they were forced to live as foreigners. The text of this prayer sounds thus:

*Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who repays you  
according to what you have done to us.  
Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks.*

This prayer is one of the most horrifying imprecatory psalms in the Old Testament. A reader might question whether the one praying in Psalm



137 was perhaps ignorant of Jeremiah's letter, or whether he consciously resisted the prophet's appeal. Does the Bible contain contradictory texts regarding this point?

Psalms 137 is indeed a completely different sort of prayer from that to which Jeremiah encouraged the exiles, although we must keep in mind that Jeremiah 29, like every prophecy, was 'a word spoken in due season', a text meant for that time, which does not necessarily have the same value and validity in other situations separate from its own direct context. With these words the prophet was addressing the disorientated group of exiles in the period after the first captivity in 597 BC, to guard them from a passive negativism as well as from being blinded by a disastrous optimism. The Jewish exiles must comply with the way by which God is taking them, and positively apply themselves to the context in which they find themselves. At the same time, however, the Book of Jeremiah does contain words of disaster for Babylon itself (Jer. 25:12, 27:7). Particularly striking is the great prophecy against Babylon at the conclusion of the book (Jer. 50-51), proving that Jeremiah also sent a completely different letter to Babylon! Apart from the letter for prayer *pro* Babylon (Jer. 29), there is also the letter with a prayer *contra* Babylon (Jer. 50-51).

In the fourth year of King Zedekiah's reign, about the same time as the letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29, the prophet gave a 'scroll' to Seraiah to take with him, containing a description of all the disaster that was to befall Babylon (Jer. 51:59ff). This scroll is read and then thrown into the Euphrates, having been tied to a stone – an act symbolizing the downfall of Babylon. 'Lord, you have said you will destroy this place, so that neither people nor animals will live in it; it will be desolate forever.' (Jer. 51:62). There was a time that Nebuchadnezzar was God's 'war club' (51:20ff), but there comes a time when God will punish this club (51:25). In Jer. 51:35ff there is even an explicit imprecation for Babylon along the lines of Psalm 137: "May the violence done to our flesh be on Babylon", say the inhabitants of Zion. "May our blood be on those who live in Babylonia," says Jerusalem'. How YHWH responds to this prayer is expressed in Jer. 51:36ff: 'Therefore this is what the Lord says: "See, I will defend your cause and avenge you; I will dry up her sea and make her springs dry. Babylon will be a heap of ruins, a haunt of jackals, an object of horror and scorn, a place where no one lives"'. ■

The prayer for Babylon in Jeremiah 29 and the prayer against Babylon in Psalm 137 are two texts on different levels, meant for different times. Jeremiah's appeal to pray for Babylon has its own function and purpose in the context of the early captivity, to bring the Jewish exiles to the recognition that it is the *via Babylonica* that God is taking with his people, and to build along that road towards the future. Later, from a thoroughly different perspective, the Psalmist, in the face of deep hatred against God's people, turns to YHWH in utter despair to pray for the fulfilment of his own words (Gen 12:2; Jer. 14:17-22, Jer. 50-51). In the brokenness of life as a foreigner, both prayers have their rightful place.

- *This translation by Sabine Bosscha, with the permission of the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), 1984 edition.*

# How did the ‘strangers and sojourners’ live? *Oikos* in Luke: notes on a core Lucan concept<sup>1</sup>

In our time, the ‘home’ or ‘house’ is primarily a matter that relates to one’s personal circumstances. The continuing process of individualization touches almost every sphere of life and every social relationship. This article consists mostly of a Biblical and theological reflection on the sociological and theological significance of the concept of *oikos*: house(hold), as Luke uses it. In this way, I would like to contribute to further reflection on this concept as it was then, and as it is now.



## Lexicographic background

It is important to understand the Old Testament and classical background of the terms *oikos* and *oikia*, for example as they are used in the LXX. Already at an early stage, there was a clear connection between *oikos* as a house and as a temple, the house of God, the treasury, the palace, the king’s house. It is frequently used in a religious sense, as a place of worship.

At the same time, there is a strong and frequent reference to those who share the home, and (family) possessions. In addition, we should note its religious sense as a ‘house of prayer’.

In the new Testament, the term ‘house’ is linked to the Kingdom of God. Just as strongly, ‘house’ is linked to the assembly of believers in the early church. Much of the instruction found in the epistles addresses ‘households’; clearly they are of great importance.

In classical Greek, *oikos* refers not only to the building, the dwelling, but also to the persons living in it: the household, the family. *Oikos* is also used to describe ‘belongings’ in the broadest sense of the word, the house and all the goods and possessions found in it.

It is striking how often Luke uses the term *oikos*. In the gospel of Luke (ch 19:5,9) and in the Acts (ch 10:2, 22, 30; 11:12-14), he sometimes uses it, in one and the same context, to mean both ‘house’ and ‘family’.

## Social and community aspects

A sociological approach can be used to explore the relevance of ‘*oikos*’ as Luke uses it. The political context – Roman rule – and the bond God has with the ‘land’ both come into play. Sociologically speaking, Luke profoundly challenges the commonly-held codes and knowledge of his day by combining them with alternative structures. That has a significant bearing on Luke’s use of the concept of *oikos* in his time.

## Kingdom and well-being in Luke 4.

Luke 4:16-43 is essential and programmatic for the understanding of the Kingdom, as Jesus proclaims it. For Luke, this concerns especially the poor of the land. Central to the social and economic relationships of the time was the question: to whom does the land belong? Leviticus 25:23 (ESV) reads: “*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.*” For the household especially, it is important that land is available to sustain life; this is a basic and salutary institution.

## The Kingdom and changes in the meaning of ‘household’.

Jesus’ coming had an effect on social structures also. In Luke 12:49-53 we read that Jesus had not come to bring peace on earth. For Jesus’ disciples, social relationships and responsibilities have changed. Service in His house is not a matter of family relationships; rather, it comes from knowing His revelation, and from being shaped by it. In Luke’s time, the confession of Christ often led to the break-up of social relationships. Jesus’ actions in regard to his family in Luke 8:19-21 are very instructive: it is no longer biological criteria that determine relationships (see also Luke 11:27ff).

## The Kingdom and the table for the poor

Within a household, sharing the table was highly significant. Hence, Jesus’ forgiveness finds visible expression especially in fellowship around the table. Luke 15:2 and Mark 2:15 show that this provoked strong resistance. By eating a piece of the broken

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bread, each person partaking of the meal shares in the blessing that the head of the household has pronounced over it. Luke portrays the *oikos* as an open house. The table is no longer closed, but open, with all the social consequences that follow. At that time, social structures were based on reciprocity, on maintaining the status quo. As such, they reinforced the great contrast between rich and poor. Within a culture of honour and shame, a restricted circle of the (mutually supporting) wealthy exploited the great mass of the poor. Within the overall structure of society, everyone's place and position was firmly fixed. By contrast, within Luke's depiction of the *oikos*, the poor are no longer oppressed. Instead, they receive space and find joy. It is very striking that in Luke 1:46-55 and 6:20-26, social relationships are overturned. This thought also returns in Luke 14:12-14. With royal generosity, Jesus teaches a liberal and open-handed invitation to share in His bounty. In this way, the open table has become a visible proclamation of the Kingdom. The *oikos* has a social impact also.

#### ***The King claims the household.***

Jesus took a critical position in regard to the relationship between patrons and their subordinates in His time. This had consequences for His view of power and control over others. Among Jesus' disciples, fathers are conspicuous by their absence. James and John, members of the 'intermediate generation' of a larger household, are counted among His followers, but their father Zebedee is not. The coming of the Kingdom changes their position within the household, and that sets up tensions. Luke 18:28-30 is telling, in that it explicitly mentions the leaving of house and home, parents and family, etc. In Luke 8:1-3, a number of women, acting as 'heads of households', follow Jesus. And what are the implications of Luke 12:33 and 14:33 for men and their households? For Jesus and His disciples (after all, they have left everything for the Kingdom), a hospitable welcome into the homes of believers is essential for missionary growth.

#### ***Is the Kingdom egalitarian?***

Some have argued that the 'Jesus movement' of the first centuries set aside patriarchal family structures and replaced them with an 'association of equals'<sup>2</sup>. By contrast, others have pointed to the continuing importance of hierarchical structures within the *oikos* of the church<sup>3</sup>. Slaves remain slaves, and masters remain masters. *Oikos* as a model has not been overthrown but redefined. In Mark and Luke, *oikos* and everything that comes with it 'remain the

basic ecclesial metaphor'<sup>4</sup>. And that is entirely in line with the vision and actions of Jesus.

#### **Theological significance.**

The Kingdom or *basileia* is fundamental for the new 'household'. What does Luke base that on, theologically? The reign of God has been revealed in Jesus Christ. In principle, that has changed everything, including the house(hold). Increasingly, *oikos* becomes the expression of the ideal fellowship, a social unity with a theological foundation. Here, all share in the labour, all are fed, and all protect the other.

#### ***The reign of the Father (of the house)***

In Luke, the dominion of God is especially accentuated in the person of the Father. For Luke, the Fatherhood of God is very important (see Luke 11:2-13, and 12:32). In particular, the parable of the lost son (Luke 15) throws light on this Fatherhood. In a very special way, Jesus shows us the nearness of the reign of God. Right at its core, we see the love of God and the goodness of the Father.

The proclamation of the love of God and the goodness of the Father.

The reign of God has become tangible in the evident rescue of the lost, and the joy over their salvation, the gift of the Father's love. Seeking the lost (Luke 19:10) is the core of the Saviour's work, and that is the Father's will (Luke 10:21). The three parables of Luke 15 culminate in the Father's joy over the return of His lost children. The Kingdom is opened to them. Luke 15:20 portrays the primacy of the fatherly love of God. Such a portrayal would have strongly challenged the social norms of the day. Luke, however, values it positively, and in so doing creates conditions for return and confession of guilt. In this way, repentance becomes a gift, worked by the Father's love.

#### ***The Father of Luke 15, seen through Eastern eyes.***

Luke's attention for the role of the *pater familias* is significant, in view of its social and historical context. *Oikos* was largely understood as a synonym for power, possessions and privilege. The *pater familias* of Luke 15 determines the nature of the relationship. Seen against the background of his time and culture, Luke's portrayal of the father is all the more challenging, because he refrains from dictating or fully exercising his fatherly power and authority. For the father to act as he does, in this situation, is actually quite shocking. What will become of the family name, which the young son has so grossly dishonoured?



Within the social structures of the day, *oikos* stood for the control and management of the household's possessions. As Luke portrays it, this father creates within his household a place for its members to live. This provision transcends relationships between individuals. It is determined by real needs, and by true fellowship under the grace and mercy of God.

***The Son of Man in Zacchaeus' house, the Friend of tax collectors and sinners.***

In Luke 19:1-10, Jesus invites Himself, as it were, to be a guest in Zacchaeus' house, and Zacchaeus receives Him joyfully (vv. 5, 6). This joy is expressed in a radical change of life (v.8). Jesus' words show just how far-reaching, how liberating, how life-giving this encounter is; how it brings salvation, not just for Zacchaeus, but for his whole family and household. It goes to the very heart of the mission Jesus was given by His Father. The salvation of the Kingdom is proclaimed in all its breadth, no matter how fiercely such a proclamation might be resisted (see Luke 7:34 and Matthew 11:19).

***Oikos in the Acts***

The basic threads of Luke 10 and 19 are seen to return in the book of Acts. In Acts 10:22, the household of Cornelius has a prominent role. Peter is invited to come into the house, and there the centurion and all his household are instructed in the gospel (Acts 10: 24b, 27 and 33; see also Acts 11:14). Other significant instances occur in Acts 16, with

the conversion of Lydia and of the prison keeper in Philippi. When Lydia is baptized (Acts 16:15), those of her household are explicitly included. Further, she opens her house to the apostles. Similarly, we read in Acts 16:31 and 34 of the changes that take place within the prison keeper's household.

Acts 18 recounts how Crispus, the synagogue ruler in Corinth, comes to faith in the Lord. Again, we see how his whole household is included (v.8). And the effect of this conversion on the surrounding community is explicitly mentioned.

***Oikos in the early church***

In addition to its sociological and theological dimensions, it is worth paying attention to the significance of *oikos* for the ecclesiology of the early Christian church.

***The house of God as a house of prayer.***

The Old Testament background of the use of *oikos* as 'house of God' and 'house of prayer' should be noted. The Christian church is the temple of God, the *oikos* of God, if you like, a spiritual house. This is part of the Christian proclamation of the gospel. Father's house (Luke 2:49) and the Kingdom of God cannot be separated. In this context, John 8:35 and 14:2 also have much to tell us.

***Oikos and oikia as descriptors for the Christian congregation.***

The relationship between *oikos* as the congregation

and as the place of assembly is also important. Studies in archaeology and social history show that in the first centuries of the church, the family home was often the place of worship for the congregation, and its base of operations for missionary activity. Acts 2:46, 5:42 and 12:12 point in this direction. It seems reasonable to conclude that many early Christian communities in Palestine had the financial means and access to larger and more spacious dwellings typical of Greco-Roman architecture.

### **Oikos and Pauls' missionary activity**

Here, we see links between the Book of Acts and the letters of Paul. Where the owner of a house came to faith, this had strategic effects for further missionary activity, and provided the needed financial support. Acts 18:7-8 provides a striking example of such a situation in Corinth. The role that Aquila and Priscilla played is another such example (see I Corinthians 16:19 and Romans 16:3-5).

### **Recent studies**

In recent times there has been more explicit attention for interdisciplinary work in sociology, archaeology and theology, to come to a sharper and more detailed picture of the early Christian church and its meeting places. In addition to larger family dwellings, evidence shows that such meetings also took place in 'non-elite taverns,' usually with a courtyard or similar that was open to the public.<sup>5</sup> In addition, more research is being done into the role of the *pater/mater familias* in shaping the religious practice of the entire household. Further investigation into the complex structure of households of the time is also taking place.<sup>6</sup>

### **Summary and conclusions**

Especially in the two works of Luke, *oikos* is a core concept with a number of different aspects. Its linguistic and lexical roots already point to a diversity of meanings. From the perspectives of both sociology and economics, *oikos* is of key significance for the livelihood of the household, and for peace and joy within it.

Luke sounds critical notes concerning practices of his day around *oikos* and *oikonomia*. He singles out institutionalized forms of patronage, reciprocity and exploitation, critically exposing them to the light of the dominion of God.

The theological significance of *oikos* is chiefly to be found in the Fatherhood of the King, and the room that is created within the house and the heart of the Father for those who are lost.

Jesus gives expression to this by making the *oikos* an open house, a table fellowship to which all are welcomed. In this way, the *oikos* gains an eschatological perspective.

The structure of the early Christian church was largely shaped by the way it assembled as house fellowships. *Oikos* became the place where salvation was preached and celebrated, a place where the *konoinia* of the Lord was practised. For this countercultural community, *oikos* also became a point of departure for missionary activity. As a result, Luke increasingly brings out the contours of the fulfilment of Genesis 12:3.

Paying careful attention to the house(hold) as Luke describes it will help us understand more clearly how early Christians lived. Having an eye and a heart for *oikos* as a core concept will lead us, as children of the Kingdom, to make room for 'displaced persons', especially in our time. And that will create a perspective of hope in a world full of the threat of exclusion and disintegration.

### **Notes:**

- 1 This translation by Aart Plug, by arrangement with the author, February 2013. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible, (NIV), 1984 edition.
- 2 I think here of the views of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza
- 3 John H. Elliott, 'The Jesus Movement Was Not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented', *Biblical Interpretation, A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*, Vol. XI, no. 2, Leiden 2003, pp.173-210.
- 4 John H. Elliott, 'The Jesus Movement', p.200.
- 5 David L. Balch, 'The Church Sitting in a Garden', in David L. Balch & Annette Weissenrieder, (eds.), *Contested Spaces. Houses and Temples in Roman Antiquity and the New Testament*, (WUNT 285), Tübingen 2012, pp.201-235.
- 6 Beryl Rawson, "The Roman Family" in *Recent Research. State of the Question*, *Biblical Interpretation, A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*, Vol. XI, no.2, Leiden 2003, pp.119-138.



# The Ethics of the Early Church: what can we learn?<sup>1</sup>

**In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the early church, especially in the manner in which Christians found their place and way in the society of their day. How did they interact with the prevailing structures and culture? What was their distinctive appeal?**



**T**his interest is not really surprising, for we are moving into a 'post-Christian' situation. The so-called Constantinian era, in which Christianity was the dominant religion and the chief influence on our culture, has become a thing of the past. Ongoing secularisation and de-christianisation is leaving Christianity as a minority religion in Western Europe, with all the consequences of that. In this sense, contemporary Christianity increasingly finds itself in a situation resembling that of the early church.

For us, attention to the early church is more than just of historical interest. It can help us understand how to deal with the process of secularisation of our time. The style of living of the early church must have appealed to those around, and been very attractive to many of them. The intriguing question is: what precisely was so attractive about Christian believers in that time, what was new and different – and what was not?

This leads us to more basic questions: to what extent did early Christians engage in what we call 'ethics'? And if they did, what did these 'ethics' look like? These are the questions we will address in this article.

### Three perspectives

In this investigation, we must clearly distinguish three perspectives.

To begin with, we must focus on the life of the early church, a life marked by mutual love and acts of charity. Put simply, the church did not find its origin in a new moral ideal or ethical concept: it was born in the love of Christ. He, their Redeemer and Renewer, was the Lord of their lives. In this context, any questions we may ask concerning ethical reflection in the early church are secondary. Not because these questions are unimportant, but because we can only begin to explore them if we

understand that the Gospel was not a moral ideal or programme, but a new existence. This new life was lived completely within the context of the Kingdom, which had come and was to come in Christ. The eschatological character of the Christian life, and the expectation of Christ's imminent return, meant that foundational ethical reflection was not regarded as urgent. Why should it be, when the good life was no longer to be sought in humanity and its potentials, but was experienced as a gift of Christ's love, poured out in believers' hearts by the Holy Spirit?

The second perspective arises from the first. If daily life has priority, then this is what we should examine: everyday life in all its social contexts, large and small. How did Christians deal with each other: in marriage, in relationships between parents and children, servants and masters? What were their attitudes towards the civil authorities, towards state deities, the military, and so on? These questions could not be avoided; to do so would have required Christians to withdraw from the world. Encouraged by the New Testament epistles, believers found their way *within* existing social structures. However, this too cannot be regarded as 'ethics' in the true sense of the word, as a foundational moral reflection on questions of good and evil.

It is only in the third place that ethical reflection as such comes into the picture. What was the early Christian view of ethical questions; of moral development and growth? It turns out that the early church had very little overt interest in such matters. Nevertheless, this is the key issue in this article. There is more to be said about this, as long as it is understood that for the first Christians it was always a secondary and derived question.

In what follows, I will work out each of these three aspects in more detail, in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the key issues. Having done so, we will be able to set out directions for further reflection.

### **Christian love and acts of charity.**

The lives of early Christians, characterized by love toward God and the neighbour, can only be understood through Christ. Following Christ was to

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live a new life, a life that was quite different from that of the society in which Christians were born, and lived, and had to find their way. In many places, early Christian texts demonstrate that turning to God in Jesus Christ meant a clean break with the past, in every aspect of life.

The sick were cared for, prisoners were visited, the dead who had no next-of-kin were buried (Matthew 25:31-46). This was quite unusual: it set Christians apart from all others. In his study about the mission and spread of the early Christian church, Von Harnack has fittingly described this development as *'Das Evangelium der Liebe und Hilfeleistung'* (*'The Gospel of love and charity'*)<sup>2</sup>.

It is important to understand that this love of and for Christ, through the Holy Spirit, drove everything. Christians did not begin by developing a theory about good and evil, or by designing a good life; they were taken captive by the love of Christ and by the power that proceeded from this love.

#### ***Social structures of the time***

It would, however, be naïve romanticism to regard early Christians as some kind of unworldly commune, withdrawn from everyday society. Early Christians lived within and were part of the social structures of their day, and it was within them that they gave account of their faith. Remarkably, they did so by remaining within the place and situation they were in when the call of

the Gospel came to them. This style of living was not an accommodation to the world around them. They were outspoken and unambiguous in their rejection of certain aspects of the surrounding culture: worship of state deities, popular games, warfare, etc. Christians formed a distinctively countercultural fellowship.

It is especially this distinctive character of the life of the early church that is the focus of renewed attention today. Has the time perhaps come for us to re-orient ourselves to this manner of standing in the world?

Still, whatever might be said from a moral perspective about the way in which Christians stood in their world, this is not yet 'ethics': a systematic reflection on questions concerning good and evil.

#### ***'Ethics' in its true sense.***

Did the early church have its own view on ethics? Meijering writes:

*'In the absence of ethical reflection ... precise ethical terminology and systematic treatment is also lacking. Jewish and popular Hellenistic terminology is simply taken over, without any further reflection on the extent to which new meanings are given to existing terms.'*<sup>3</sup>

Here, Meijering writes about the first century AD. After that, things change, but in what way? In this article, I intend to chart this development. And in doing so, I'd like to pick up on Meijering's

observation that the terminology of other streams of thought is taken over 'without further reflection'. This raises the question: what does the New Testament have to say? Does it have its own ethical perspective, which the early church failed to discern, or might have lost sight of? Or is the New Testament's ethical reflection – such as it is – merely incidental? To make sense of this aspect of early church history, a brief exploration of the New Testament is in order.

### **Ethics in the New Testament.**

In Philippians 3:10, Paul writes that he has but one desire: "I want to know Christ, and the power of His resurrection". Whatever legalistic righteousness – moral credit, if you like – he may have had, he now regards as loss, as refuse, as rubbish. Those who believe in Christ are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and they expect Him, their Saviour, from heaven. Their walk of life is no longer earthly. Only a little further – in chapter 4:4-9 – Paul enjoins the church to rejoice in the Lord, in the knowledge that He is near. Then, in the same breath, and as a practical rule for life, he urges them to think about 'whatever is excellent or praiseworthy'. The word he uses here: ἀρετή: 'virtue', is the one that defined Greek ethical thinking since the time of Aristotle.

For Paul, ethical reflection does not revolve around norms or values, nor is it determined by what is useful: what counts is the kind of person one is. Paul does not elaborate, but obviously he must have known what he was doing when he took over this key expression from Greek ethical thinking. This glimpse into Philippians is an illustration of how the early church dealt with ethical questions. The knowledge of Christ, the walk with Him, the power of His cross and resurrection – that is the key, that is what it's all about. And if anyone might ask how this should find expression in everyday life, then the word 'virtue' also crops up. We will see how in succeeding generations this approach from the perspective of virtue continues.

We already referred to the "household codes" for life; concrete *paraenesis* in relation to living within the basic structures of society: relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, servants and masters. These sets of rules – see Ephesians 6:1-9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; I Peter 2:18-3:7 – do not comprehensively unfold a new social system; rather, they exhort believers to accept and live within the existing structures of society. In this, a key word is 'submission'.

This might convey the impression that the new and renewing thrust of the Gospel had capitulated to the hard reality of this world. Actually, the reverse was true. This was no accommodation or compromise: it was a conscious 'strategy'. What was new in the Christian faith was not found in ethical ideals or norms, but in filling the existing structures with the love of Christ. This is not in contrast with the first element – love and acts of charity; even less does this promote some kind of double standard. 'Submission' as a key concept in the 'household codes' is no evidence of servility or cringing obsequiousness; rather, it shows how the love of Christ, unique in its nature and form, finds expression and wins the neighbour for Him.<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that the call to 'submission' is always coupled to its basis: 'in the Lord'.<sup>5</sup>

What conclusions might we draw from this survey? To begin with, that there was no categorical rejection of the ethics of the surrounding culture. Paul, for instance, points quite freely to the good that can be found in the surrounding world. Schrage points out that the church is expected to have regard for the moral judgments of outsiders (Colossians 4:5)<sup>6</sup>. Clearly, these are not unimportant. Even more strongly, in sharply condemning the brother who cohabits with his father's wife, Paul bases his judgment on a prevailing acceptance within the wider community of what is right (I Corinthians 5:1ff)<sup>7</sup>.

As we try to enter the world of the first Christians, we quickly realize that they had little option. After all, they were learning to understand how what was new in the gospel related to the prevailing ways of thinking and living that had once been their own. The penultimate chapter of I Corinthians forms, as it were, the apotheosis of Paul's whole letter. Paul places the whole of the Christian life in the radical light of the crucified and risen Lord. No ethos can stand on its own.

The second conclusion is that for early Christians 'doctrine' and 'life' were completely and self-evidently interwoven. Keck has proposed that we might perhaps start reading the New Testament differently from the way in which we are presently accustomed: not as doctrine with ethical implications, but as a reflection on the Christian ethos.<sup>8</sup> In other words, rather than viewing the *paraenesis* as a development of the doctrinal, we should regard the doctrinal as theory on which the praxis is based.

Keck's characterization of the core of New Testament fails to do justice to the unique and distinctive character of the gospel message. Still, the church – including the church of the Reformation – has not always appreciated and applied that aspect of Biblical truth that teaches that we cannot properly understand 'doctrine' if we neglect the 'renewal of life' that is so much a part of it.

### **Ancient philosophy: the Stoics**

In the second century, the church entered a new phase. Until the middle of the century, pagan philosophers had little regard for Christianity, but this changed when Christians, in their apologetic texts, began to involve themselves in discussions about public life. This is the time of the Apologists: philosophers who, on their conversion to Christianity, began to give a public account of the interaction between the Christian faith and contemporary thinking.<sup>9</sup>

Justin Martyr (c. AD 100-165) approached ethical questions from the cosmology he had developed, in which creation, incarnation and ethics formed an integrated whole. In Justin's thinking, God is the Creator, immanently present in His creation. Christ is seen as the *logos spermatikos*, working in creation. Everywhere in creation, one can find 'seeds of divine power', products of this *logos spermatikos*. It is the calling of mankind to see these divine relationships and take them into account. Christians, as Justin saw it, understand the 'indicative' of a reasonable creation by the *logos*, as well as the expectation of the judgment that is coming upon creation, as an 'imperative' to a moral life, a life that surpasses the imperfect moral efforts of non-Christians.<sup>10</sup> In order to render this Biblical ethos compatible for his contemporaries, Justin categorized the Old Testament laws into civil, ceremonial and moral. The Decalogue, then, is the core and the lasting manifestation of this Biblical ethos.

This – in reality reductionist – concentration on 'moral law' led to an emphasis on the imperative character of the Decalogue, while the understanding that the law was embedded in God's way of redemption with Israel moved to the background. For a long time, the Gospel in the Law – as rediscovered and worked out by Calvin – was lost from view, the more so because the preamble to the Law: *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery*, was usually left out. Not only were the Old

Testament laws chiefly seen as moral imperatives; the same was true of the New Testament, of Christ. The force of the Pauline message of faith as the justification of the godless, and in this way as a 'new creation', simply cannot be contained within moral categories.

During the time of the New Testament, the influence of Stoic thinking was already widespread.<sup>11</sup> A key element of this thinking was the control of the spirit over the body. You ought not let your feelings – especially not your sexual urges – drag along and determine your actions.<sup>12</sup> Here, Stoic philosophers compared favourably to many others, in that they viewed all people equally: both men and women were expected to maintain high morals within marriage. It was to be expected, then, that Christians looked to the Stoics in matters of morality. Man was seen as a spiritual being, answerable to high standards. In regard to living a good life – especially in relation to sexuality – early Christianity and the Stoics had much in common.

In addition, the Stoics were the first to develop an ethical system that took its point of departure in the laws of nature (in its broadest, cosmic sense). In fact, ethics stood at the heart of Stoic philosophy. The man who has wisdom and understanding will be able to discern between the things beyond his control and the things he can influence. He will direct his will towards those things that he can influence, and he will 'stoically' accept the things he cannot. What counts is living in harmony with the laws of nature, and every person ought to be able to do so. After all, he is part of nature, and he ought to know what such a harmonious life consists of. The theoretical foundation for this view was that the *logos* – not just as an idea, but also something material – was seen as a rational entity and a powerful force, immanent in and active throughout the cosmos: the *pneuma*. The prevailing conception of *moira*, blind fate, was replaced by the idea of an omnipresent divinity, surrounding all mankind, steering the universe, working through laws of necessity and determining even the details of everyday life. The fact that this divinity is everywhere present and active implies that it also has a moral and universal character.

The Stoic was a cosmopolitan: his point of reference was not the laws of his own *polis*. Rather, his perspective transcended these local limitations: love towards all people regardless of origin, race, class or position. Epictetus (AD 50-130) emphasized the common origin of all humanity, leading men to

deal with others as they would wish to be treated themselves.<sup>13</sup> This might seem to have been rather abstract, but in fact it wasn't. This morality was concretely linked to the experience of 'friendship', and found expression in circles of 'friends'. Even though early Christians may have had good reason for common ground with the Stoics, this dependence did have consequences. The great emphasis on morality *per se* during the early centuries led to a neglect of the roots of Christian morality: the reconciling and recreating work of God in Christ. As a result, the Gospel of the grace of God in Christ – justification and sanctification of the sinner – was kept from developing its full vindicating and liberating power.

#### 4. Summing up:

1. The manner in which the early church addressed questions of how to live shows where its heart was beating. The love of Christ was the source of its strength, and a living fellowship with Him its secret. In its existence, the power of the Holy Spirit was manifested, and that is the power of the age to come.
2. The early church did not seek its identity in what was out of the ordinary, and it did not seek out the role of a 'counterculture'; rather, it sought its new existence in Christ, and gave expression to this new life within the structures of the world in which it lived. The idea that being Christian is not found in new, extraordinary, and specially appealing rules for living, but comes to light in the ordinary relationships within society, is fully in line with New Testament teaching. The distinctiveness of the Christian faith was not found in the creation of new structures and appealing ethical paradigms, but in serving one another in love.
3. Finally: whatever criticisms we may and perhaps should have of the early church, these may not be our first or predominant response. During its first centuries, the young Christian church had to find its way, under pressure from an often hostile environment. As I see it, Hauerwas and Wells point us in the right direction for a fair and productive treatment of the ethical thought of the early church: 'By reading Clement, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, and Augustine, we hope to learn again how to live as Christians, that is, in a world where to be a Christian is a mark not of safety, but of danger.'<sup>14</sup>

#### Notes:

- 1 This translation by Aart Plug, January 2013, by arrangement with the author. All Scripture references and quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible, (NIV), 1984 edition.
- 2 A. von Harnack, *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Leipzig 1924, pp.170-220.
- 3 E.P. Meijering, *Geschiedenis van het vroege christendom. Van de jood Jezus van Nazareth tot de Romeinse keizer Constantijn*, Amsterdam, 2004, p.282f (translation mine – AP).
- 4 G.C. den Hertog, *De passie van de hoop. Over de verhouding van eschatologie en ethiek*, Zoetermeer 2007, pp.122-127.
- 5 W. Schrage, *Die konkreten Einzelgebote in der paulinischen Paränese. Ein Beitrag zur neutestamentlichen Ethik*, Gütersloh 1961, p.196f.
- 6 Schrage, p.196f.
- 7 D. G. Horrell, 'Particular Identity and Common Ethics. Reflections on the Foundations and Content of Pauline Ethics in 1 Corinthians 5', in: F.W. Horn and R. Zimmermann (Eds.), *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ, Vol I*, Tübingen 2009, p. 205f.
- 8 L.E. Keck, 'Das Ethos der frühen Christen', in: W.A. Meeks (Ed.), *Zur Soziologie des Urchristentums. Ausgewählte Beiträge zum frühchristlichen Gemeinschaftsleben in seiner gesellschaftlichen Umwelt, Theologische Bücherei Bd. 62*, München 1979, p.35.
- 9 E.P. Meijering, *Geschiedenis van het vroege christendom*, p.284f.
- 10 U. Volp, 'Beobachtungen zur antiken Kritik an den Begründungszusammenhängen christlicher Ethik', in: F.W. Horn and R. Zimmermann (Eds.), *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ*, pp.348-351.
- 11 M. Forschner, 'Das Selbst- und das Weltverhältnis des Weisen. Über die stoische Begründung des Guten und Wertvollen', in: F. W. Horn and R. Zimmermann (Eds), *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ*, pp.19-37;
- R. M. Thorsteinsson, 'The Role of Morality in the Rise of Roman Christianity', in: B Holmberg (ed.), *Exploring Early Christian Identity, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament Bd. 26*, Tübingen 2008, pp.147-155.
- 12 J. A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, Chicago & London 1987, 18-21.
- 13 Epictetus, "Discourses", Book 1, Chapter 9 in: c Gill and R Hard (Eds.): *The discourses of Epictetus, translated by Robin Hard*. London, 1995.  
U. Schnelle, 'Paulus und Epiktet – zwei ethische Modelle', in: F.W. Horn and R. Zimmermann (Eds), *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ*, 137-158. On pages 148-155, Schnelle gives a brief summary of Epictetus' thinking. From p.156 onward Schelle shows that with all their similarities, there are three clear differences between Paul and Epictetus: (1) Paul has an entirely different view of the capacities of human rationality: For Paul, man is unable to overcome the destructiveness of his human existence in his own power; (2) For Paul, the coming of Christ brings about a fundamental break with sin; (3) Paul emphasizes love far more than Epictetus.
- 14 S. Hauerwas & S. Wells, 'How the Church Managed Before There Was Ethics', in: S. Hauerwas & S.Wells (Eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, Malden (USA) 2004, p.42.



# Being the church in a post-Christian culture

**What is the position and meaning of the church in our culture? What is the effect of secularisation on faith and life? What was it like in the early church? What changed when the Roman Emperor Constantine elevated the church to become a state church? What can we learn from all this? That is what this article is about.**



## Secularisation

The churches in the West today find themselves in a crisis situation. It is a deep crisis that has everything to do with western society having gone through the process of secularisation. Religion has less meaning for society and individual people than it once did. Today it is a matter of specialization: all sorts of subsystems function within our society, each with their own specialism. The church too is one of these subsystems: it is the place to practise religion. People are less inclined to allow their daily lives to be influenced by religion. Connected to this, the process of secularisation continues: more and more people are turning away from the church. This is being caused, among other factors, by the strong increase of individualization: the individual person develops his own identity by making his own choices. In this he no longer lets himself be led or inspired by the community or society around him, even though he is a part of it. One of the most noticeable effects of the progressing individualization is that people – including within the churches – are aiming for ‘authentic personal experience’. It is one’s own ‘I’ that consciously seeks to achieve an ‘authentic expression of one’s own inner self.’ It is the person himself that makes decisions and makes choices concerning his own life, and thus also where his ‘religion’ is concerned. For man is truly emancipated! This emancipation, however, evokes a crisis. Now that the ‘I’ is regarded as the true source of self-identity, insecurity and doubt simultaneously arise, because, while modern man had complete confidence in himself, post-modern man has completely lost that confidence. Post-modern man is searching for his self. What determines his identity? What does he have to hold on to?

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In short, the continuing effect of secularisation clearly results in the ‘marginalisation’ of faith and, connected with that, of the position and function of the church.

## Back to the beginning.

Through the process of marginalisation the church has been thrown back to considering the reason for her existence. Why is the church here? What is the message that keeps her alive and gives her the ‘right’ and even the calling to be present in this world?

The crisis in which the church finds itself summons her to revisit the sources from which she has always derived her existence. We are then referred directly back to the church as she was in the times before 313 when, in the edict of Milan, Emperor Constantine declared the Christian faith to be a privileged faith, ushering in the Constantine Era. From literature describing the early church, the image arises of the Christian congregation clearly occupying a minority position. The church was socially isolated and was being persecuted. Society did not grant the church a valued position within it. At the same time, it must be said that the church was not consciously seeking such a valued position. The church knew itself to be ‘not of this world’, which did not mean that the believers took up the position of ‘world avoiders’. Their ‘being different’ actually manifested itself in their open countenance towards the society in which the congregation lived. In this sense, the missionary attitude therefore became a natural part of the church’s existence. The church not only preached the message, she also lived it, and people around them noticed it. The disciples embodied the message that they brought.

A consequence of the persecution that took place was that it was a far-reaching step for ‘outsiders’ to join the Christian church. Such a step could cost you a great deal. That is why we can safely say that the church consisted of convinced Christians. At the same time, that strong conviction was a factor explaining the rapid growth of the young church in the first centuries. The clear message of the gospel, proclaimed with the conviction of, and reliance upon, eye and ear witnesses, was for many something to hold on to. The pure way of life in the

Christian communities was also an obvious factor. Many lived sincere and noble lives amidst the fast deteriorating morals of those days, especially in the large cities of the Roman Empire with their sexual excesses and public barbarity. A final factor was the effect of persecution, which had just begun. Because Christians were often forced to gather in secret, many wild tales were circulating among the Roman population about these Christians. This brought on the cry to destroy these 'terrible' Christians. The attitude of the martyrs, however, made a deep impression upon onlookers, often causing the spectators of the gruesome events to start pondering their lives and converting. So one could say that the church in the first centuries was very alive, drawing life from the source and living from the power of the gospel.

### **Constantine**

All this changed when Constantine came to power and granted the church a privileged position. Persecution came to an end and the church was allowed to rest. The question is whether that change should be evaluated only positively. It is a well-known fact that John Wesley called the time after Constantine 'a time wherein Satan gained a fatal advantage over the church of Christ.'

From the days of Constantine the church moved from the margin to the centre of society. In that society she now received a function that clearly placed her identity under pressure. Before Constantine liberated her from suppression, the church fully professed Jesus as Lord (*kyrios*). Now that Constantine had given her a privileged position, alongside came a second *kyrios* – the emperor. The emperor had a clear say in matters and he used that voice, sometimes very literally. The church lost its freedom in many aspects regarding society: it was expected to have a positive approach to the state institutions, not to criticize them. The contradiction between church and society faded and it became much easier for people to become a member of the church. In 529 it was even compulsory to become a Christian. This led, on the one hand, to a growth in the number of church members, but on the other hand, it formed a threat to spiritual life in the church, because many new church members became Christians in name only. The growth of the church brought the need for larger buildings for the church members to gather in. Church life therefore gradually moved from the small house gatherings, which was how it had been functioning during the first centuries, to a

larger and more impersonal religious practice in a spacious church building. Normal members of the congregation were pushed more and more to the margins, while the main event was being carried out somewhere in the front of the church by the clergy. The church changed from a church *of* believers into a church *for* believers, and a distinction was being made between the clergy and the laymen. The 'believers' were becoming passive attendants of the liturgy, especially after 360 when even joint singing was no longer permitted. Another result was that the Christian testimony weakened. The church was not expected to criticize the affairs of the state. The message that was being passed down from the Bible was supposed to support the new context in which the church had received a legitimate position. That robbed various Biblical themes of their lucidity and radicalism, for example concerning what Jesus had said to his followers in the Sermon on the Mount. Large portions of New Testament teaching were classified as unobtainable idealism. It would all become reality in an eschatological Kingdom, but now it could not be done!

A final change to take place concerned the mission work. When Constantine granted the church a position in his Empire, the church originally gained new possibilities that gave missionary work an impulse. However, the initial growing missionary incentive gradually changed. The church concentrated less on missionary work and more on maintenance. That was connected to another change that was taking place. The church was becoming an institution rather than a movement. As a movement the church is progressive, as an institution it is conservative; as a movement it is active, influencing the environment, as an institution it is passive, adapting to influences from outside; as a movement it looks to the future, as an institution it looks to the past; as a movement the church is prepared to take risks, as an institution it is afraid to do so; as a movement it crosses boundaries, as an institution, by contrast, it guards boundaries!

### **And now ...?**

Returning to the situation in which the church finds itself today, it becomes clear that the church has truly arrived in a deep crisis. What is the message that is keeping her alive and gives her the right and even the calling to be present in this world, especially when the world begrudges the church its position now that the era of Christianity is over?



Theology serves the church, so has a responsibility to search, constantly revisiting the foundations, for the manner in which the essential characteristics of the church, handed down to us from the Bible, can take shape today. Certain factors should be taken into account when doing this. Firstly, it should be clear that the situation in which the first congregations developed in New Testament times cannot be directly compared to our situation today. The time in which the church developed can be characterized as a pre-Christian era. We now live in a post-Christian era. There are certain similarities in the sense that many hundreds of thousands (or even millions) of the people today know nothing of the content of faith, just as they knew nothing in the pre-Christian times, but the differences are so substantial that they become a determining factor. Another distinction is that post-Christianity cannot be equated with post-modernism. While one cannot say by definition of post-modern man that he has and wants nothing to do with the church or with faith, it is true that post-modern man wants nothing to do with an absolute standard of truth, and this often does lead to the rejection of the absolute truth of the Bible. In this one could discover some connections with the process of secularisation, which stood at the transition to the post-modernist culture, but the effects of secularisation on these processes take place at different levels. It is for this reason that the questions put to the church today are on a different plane.

The crisis in which the church now finds itself is therefore of a completely different order from whatever crisis has been before. It is a case of a crisis on a cultural plane. In anthropological terms, post-modern man living in the post-Christian culture is a culturally very different person from his counterpart in previous centuries. At the same time, it is a case of an historical crisis, because the post-Christian culture has, throughout the process of secularisation, consciously left the period of the church behind it. It is also a case of a theological crisis because the church, through the developments going on around her (which do not leave her unaffected), discovers in various ways that something of a breach has developed between her existence now and her existence as it took shape in the beginning.

### **In conclusion**

Yet this is not all there is to be said. The church must not walk away from the crisis but confront it, listening honestly to the questions that are being asked. The church need not fear that process of reconsideration. The crisis in which the church finds itself can grant the church the opportunity to become complete and truly the church once more. We may cherish that expectation, especially when the church and her theology acknowledge the wealth of the tradition in which she stands and in which she can also be church today. That wealth has been expressed by the churches of the

Reformation in the principles of *sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *sola scriptura* [by grace alone, by faith alone and by the Scriptures alone].

The three *solas* show that the church – upon reflection – does not belong to us. Firstly, she belongs to God. She originates from and lives out of his grace. Secondly, we may look upon her with eyes of faith, so that we can see that God is at work with his church, and that he is taking her with him to his future. Thirdly, the church lives from the only source that has been given to her: the Word of God. In it the church discovers the secret of her existence: God's love and mercy. Therein the church also finds the patterns with which she can search for a way of being church today, in obedience to her Lord and Saviour. And that in such a way that she can explain to people of today that they too, post-modern as they are in a post-Christian culture, are being sought by the Lord and Saviour of the church. What these patterns look like, and what consequences they may and will (and maybe should) have for the church and for her functioning today – these are the questions that have a right to be asked. How should the church today explain to post-modern man that the Lord and Saviour of the church is seeking him or her? How should the church handle the distinction between clergy and laymen? What does it mean when the Bible speaks of the priesthood of all believers? Must the church look for new forms of community to make it clear that the church is a fellowship of believers in Christ, in which each believer represents part of the body of Christ and takes up their position therein with the talents given them? All these questions the church must confront honestly, prepared to listen to what the Bible presents to us, searching for ways and possibilities to apply what the Bible says. The church has this calling because she – although not of this world –

has been placed in this world, with Jesus' word of promise: you will be my witnesses (Acts 1:8)

The church has been pushed to the margin. She has been deprived of the central position that she had acquired for many ages, but through this she found herself in a situation in which she can truly be herself. The church can have her say, because she does not speak her own words but the word of her Lord and Saviour. That word may, and must, resound: open-minded, inviting, encouraging, correcting, confronting, appealing to all people to believe and repent, to entrust themselves to Jesus Christ. That is the message with which the church stands in the world. The church has landed in a crisis. The crisis brings us – in a way – back to the beginning. There the Spirit was working in the rapid growth of the Christian faith in the first centuries. The situation in which we find ourselves as churches today, impels us – perhaps more than ever before – to expect help from the Holy Spirit in order to be the church of Christ in this world, as strangers and pilgrims, but always being prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15).

#### Notes:

- 1 See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New-York: Orbis Books 1996, 50, who derives facts from H. Richard Niebuhr.

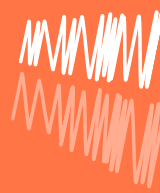
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## Reminder survey



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**Jesus said, “I am  
the light of the world.”** John 8:12