Notes on *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, by Alan Kreider (2016)

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Kalamazoo Mennonite Fellowship

May 1, 2016

Alan Kreider is a professor emeritus of church history and mission at AMBS (Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary). He has often written on church history and on Christian pacifism and its history. In this, his latest book, he sets out to answer the seemingly simple question: why did the Christian movement grow so quickly?

According to Kreider’s sources, by the time of Constantine’s becoming the emperor of Rome in 310, Christians made up between 8 and 12 percent of the population in the Roman empire, a growth rate of about 40% per decade, although some scholars dispute this percentage. Constantine becoming emperor was important because he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. (Kreider doesn’t talk about the growth of the Christian movement in the Persian empire, but that’s an important story, too.)

Kreider notes there are very few missionaries (we only know of two), and worship services were not evangelistic. Kreider writes, “In the aftermath of the persecution by Nero in AD 68, churches around the empire–at varying speeds in varying places–closed their doors to outsiders. By the end of the second century, most of them had instituted what liturgical scholars called the *disciplina arcani*, the ‘discipline of the secret,’ which barred outsiders from entering ‘private’ Christian worship services and ordered believers not to talk to outsiders about what went on behind closed doors.” Furthermore, it was harder to become a full member of a Christian church then, typically involving a long period of preparation, finding sponsors, and vigorous screenings to ensure that potential converts were being reformed in the character. People didn’t just show up one day and “ask Jesus into their hearts” and join the church that day.

Kreider gives several answers to the question of early church growth. Perhaps the main reason is hidden in this quotation from Cyprian, writing in 256: “[We] are philosophers not in words, but in deeds; we exhibit out wisdom not by our dress, but by truth; we know virtues by their practice rather than through boasting of them; we do not speak great things but we live them.” The early churches tended to be places where a very strange thing was happening: people were coming together from both the upper and lower classes, men and women, free and enslaved, and they were taking care of each others. Kreider notes that the welcome to women as full participants in the early church’s life was crucial, as well as the welcome to the poor. After all, half the people or so in the empire were women, and more than half were poor. This was not a religion for well-off men alone. And they took care of one another.

Kreider believes the Roman church in the early centuries believed strongly in the virtue of patience. They trusted and hoped in God. They were willing to endure difficult times, even of persecution, because they developed this habit of patience. They were unwilling to force their beliefs on others because they didn’t need to; God was in control.

Here is a short passage from Tertullian’s essay on patience (“the first treatise by a Christian on a single virtue,” says Kreider):

God is so completely sufficient as a deposit for our patience! If it is a wrong which you deposit in God’s care, God is an avenger; if a loss, God is a restorer; if pain, God is a healer; if death; God is a reviver. What honor is granted to Patience, to have God as her debtor! And not without reason: for she keeps all God’s decrees; she has to do with all God’s commands. She fortifies faith, is the pilot of peace, assists charity, establishes humility, waits long for repentance, sets the seal on confession, rules the flesh, preserves the spirit, bridles the tongue, restrains the hand, tramples temptations under foot, drives away scandals, gives their crowning grace to martyrdom, consoles the poor, teaches the rich moderation, overstrains not the weak, exhausts not the strong, is the delight of the believer, invites the Gentile, commends the servant to the master, and the master to God, adorns the woman, makes the man approved, is loved in childhood, praised in youth, looked up to in age, is beauteous in either sex, in every time of life.

The care the early church took with its catechumens, rather than being a hindrance to the growth of the church, actually aided its growth. By the patient care the church took to form Christians in the new way of life, what Kreider calls their *habitus*, it helped to assure that when persecutions or discouragements came, Christians remained Christians. If almost everyone remains a Christian after becoming one, then the forty per cent growth rate is easily achievable if only every other Christian was instrumental in sponsoring a new convert.

Kreider traces a falling off of this patience once Constantine begins to marry the Roman state to the Christian religion, and Augustine, in the words of Peter Brown (quoted by Krieder) began to believe “that Christianity could be the religion of an entire society.” Eventually, it was essentially required, even through force, that people be Christians in the West. In turns of numbers, this change of strategy was very successful! In the next two centuries, the West and Christianity became essentially the same thing, and everyone was a Christian, whether they knew it or not, or wanted it or not. We Anabaptists, among others, think this was a very bad move! And we live with the consequences of this today.

Kreider doesn’t spend a lot of time talking about what this notion of “patience ferment” might mean for the 21st century church. But these models from the early church are very evocative. Kreider concludes his book thusly:

If we Christians today wish to embody this patience and to claim that our faith is not intrinsically violent, we may find it helpful to converse with the early Christians whom we have studied. We will not do things precisely as the early Christians did, but the early believers may give us new perspectives and point us to a “lost bequest.” As we rediscover this bequest, we will not make facile generalizations or construct how-to formulas—those would be impatient responses! Instead, seeking the reformation of our habitus by the work of the Holy Spirit and by catechesis rooted in the teaching and way of Jesus, we will begin to live in new ways in today’s *saeculum*. We will discover we are in a good tradition. And we will say with Cyprian and other early Christians, “We do not speak great things by we live them.”