



Acts and iPods

Being the Church in the first and twenty-first centuries

by Stephen Chambers

Illustration by Chris Bruer

For generations after the Lord ascended back to heaven, Christians faced the huge challenge of reaching out to Gentiles and including them in the church. This issue didn't really surface in Jesus' own ministry, since he rarely dealt with non-Jews. Nor did the Gentile mission become a major issue right after the Ascension, but only years later when Christianity began taking root in the mixed-population cities beyond Israel itself (see Acts 11:19-20). However, once that shift began, the life of our Christian ancestors suddenly became more complicated. They had to figure out how to live and engage in mission among people who shared neither the distinctive spiritual beliefs nor the characteristic patterns of life God's people had always maintained with great consistency.

Our challenge is similar. As Reg Bibby shows in his latest book, *The Emerging Millennials*, Canada's Christian heritage is fading fast. Few people outside the church have even the most basic understanding of Christian doctrine and practice. In effect, they are "Gentiles" as far as twenty-first century Christians are concerned: outsiders to our faith and church. That creates a new set of challenges our grandparents never had to face. How can we not only live among, but reach out to people who are basically strangers to our beliefs and traditions?

Lessons from history

It's logical to look to the experience of the early church for guidance, as long as we bear in mind the great differences between its setting and ours. We can't transfer ideas and strategies from their context into ours willy-nilly. We need to remember, too, that the Lord may have a different future in mind for us than He had for them, even if some aspects of our respective situations seem similar. As history marches toward Christ's return, the Church's story is likely to keep changing direction in ways we can't predict, or even anticipate, with much accuracy.

That said, though, what might we learn from the Church's early experience, as we face circumstances in some ways parallel? Broadly speaking, our predecessors adopted a double pattern for their life and mission from which we can learn.

Adaptation

The first part of this pattern is that these early Christians were sometimes quite willing to take over and adapt "Gentile" practices for their own purposes. Jews had done this for centuries, notably by translating the Scriptures into Greek (the well-known Septuagint), but Christians repeatedly extended this pattern in ways Judaism resisted. The best example is the Church's decision made at the council Luke describes in Acts 15

that Gentile Christians should be released from most of the Law's ritual requirements (Acts 15:19-20). They didn't need to be circumcised, eat kosher, or keep the Sabbath, all of which had always been ironclad requirements for outsiders who wanted to join the nation of Israel. This was a huge innovation! But the Lord gave our forebears courage to make it, for the sake of His mission.

The Church made other, smaller changes for similar reasons. Most Christians adopted Gentile, not Jewish, terms for referring to their assembly (*ekklesia*, the word we translate as "church") and to its leaders ("overseer," "deacon"). Starting with Paul and Luke, Christians drew heavily on Greco-Roman patterns in creating our faith's new literature, employing literary forms and types of arguments other Jewish writers were slower to adopt. They circulated these writings using the new technology of the book, not on traditionally-Jewish scrolls—so much so that the book-form itself became strongly associated with Christianity. In all these ways, Christianity distinguished itself from its Jewish roots by becoming more open to the Gentile world than Judaism had generally been, especially its technologies and tactics.

But they would only go so far.

Holding on

Christians refused to give up many of the more substantive parts of their Jewish heritage, even while they were borrowing and adapting other bits and pieces from their Gentile environment. We see this both in their doctrine and practice.

The earliest creeds, for example, consistently confess Jesus as the Christ whom the Hebrew Scriptures had spoken of long before. In the very early, very short creed Paul quotes in 1 Cor. 15:3-5, the phrase "according to the Scriptures" already occurs twice. Obviously, this phrase would only make sense to Gentiles if the church taught them in considerable detail what those Scriptures—the Jewish Scriptures—had prophesied. And this is exactly what we find in the Church fathers. They tend to quote the Old Testament more frequently, not less, as the Gentile mission progresses. Conversely, terms drawn from Gentile philosophy seem to become less, not more, acceptable as time goes by.

An example is the term *logos* ("the Word"), which the Gospel of John introduced into Christian circles but which later became so closely associated with heretics it wasn't included in any of our formal creeds. Even the Church's decision to confess in the Nicene Creed that Christ is "of one substance with the Father" created controversy in some circles because of that phrase's philosophically-

derived roots. Such examples show that the church was intentional about maintaining the essential Jewishness of its doctrine, even as it reached out to Gentiles.

The Church's practice was also resolutely Jewish in many ways. We see this clearly in its worship life. They modelled closely many early baptismal customs on the Jewish practice of "proselyte baptism," and patterned communion rites after the Passover liturgy. Even though they chose different days for these practices, Christians resembled Jews quite closely in fasting twice a week and gathering once a week for worship. The festivals of Easter and Pentecost were celebrated, for at least a century, according to the Jewish calendar. And the

new Scriptures Christians read in worship—Gospels, Pauline letters, and other writings—paralleled the Hebrew Scriptures' threefold collection of Law, Prophets, and Writings.

Overall, the pattern of Christian life was so obviously based on Judaism that pagans sometimes became confused about the differences between Christianity and Judaism.

Both biblical testaments, and our Lutheran confessional documents need to continue animating our Christian life

A famous example is the governor Gallio's decision that the conflict between Paul and other Jews in Corinth was simply a battle *within* Judaism (Acts 18:12-15). Thus, it's not surprising that Jews sometimes accused Christians of stealing their birthright. For instance, Trypho's indignant question to Justin Martyr, "What then, are *you* Israel? Do the Scriptures belong to *you*?" and Justin's reply, "We are more faithful to God than you; we are the true Israelitic race," shows that he basically agreed. To Justin and many others, Christianity was the legitimate heir of all things Jewish. No wonder, then, the Church's outreach to Gentiles took place in a way that was, for the most part, recognizably Jewish in both form and substance.

That was then. This is now.

Spotting these patterns within the early church's mission to Gentiles is relatively easy. Applying them to our context is harder. The early church seemed ready to adopt a number of Gentile features, while clinging with great tenacity to the thoroughly Jewish character of its core beliefs and practices. What might that double pattern suggest for our mission today?

First, we should be profoundly thankful God has kept us faithful to the foundational traditions we've received from our predecessors. Just as the earliest Christians stood firmly on their Judaism and carefully built their doctrine and practice upon that solid base, so we now stand upon their example and seek to be equally faithful to their pattern of faith and life. That the Lord has so far enabled us in Lutheran Church-Canada to do this with consistent faithfulness is a cause for great rejoicing.

However, the challenge is to keep doing this in a context that often tempts us to change too much, too fast. Sometimes we're starting to resemble those early Christians Paul had to remind to *continue* standing firm in the faith they received (Gal 1:6-9; 1 Cor 15:1-3). Like them, we too are tempted to loosen our vital connections to the essential core of our faith.

Most of all that means the Holy Scriptures, as well as the Lutheran Confessions that comment on and explain them. For us, these have always been non-negotiables, the heritage we not only honour with our lips but from which we draw life. Just as Judaism's scriptures and traditions permeated the doctrine and practice of the early church, so now in our day both of the biblical testaments, and our Lutheran confessional documents, need to continue animating every bit of our Christian life, both personally and collectively. So:

- Christians, keep reading and studying your Bibles! Doing so will deepen your faith and renew your life like nothing else.
- Church workers, keep planning and teaching top-notch Bible studies! No other work you do will invigorate our congregations with such power.
- And while we're at it, let's sink our roots more deeply into the Lutheran Confessions.

If we want our church not only to survive but thrive in the 21st century Canadian context, we need to be just as determined as our ancestors to know, and draw life from, our foundational heritage in the Word.

What about our worship life? Here too the early church's example is helpful. Rather than reducing the Jewishness of their rites in the midst of a thoroughly Gentile environment, our predecessors tackled the problem from the opposite end. They didn't ditch tradition, but taught Gentile converts to understand it and make it their own. Over the centuries the shape of the tradition we've inherited has come to look a little different from what the early church adapted from its Jewish roots, but as we study these things, we will appreciate the number and strength of the connections between early Christian worship and the traditional forms of service we usually use in our church today. So:

- Christians, embrace your roots! Let your pastor teach you to worship in continuity with generations past, for the sake of generations to come.
- Church workers, don't lose your nerve! Stick with the ancient traditions of the liturgy, to nurture and sustain the congregation.

As we continue doing this, I suspect we'll find that the Holy Spirit will cause outsiders in our day to sense and appreciate our church's enduring strength, and make it their own.

And what about change?

At the same time, we don't need to be afraid to change anything at all in the church. This is the second part of the early church's double pattern: willingness to adopt some ways of doing things that originate in the "Gentile" world. As the first Christians clearly understood, new forms of articulating and sharing the Gospel should never be off-limits. New media? Emerging technologies? More culturally-appropriate ways of presenting the message? Let's use them to the full, just as earlier Lutherans enthusiastically exploited the potential of the book, printing press, radio, and TV.

We should fully embrace new ways of organizing ourselves for mission, too, even when they're based on what we might consider "Gentile" ideas such as decentralization and efficiency. We've already started doing this to some extent, training and supporting church workers overseas in non-traditional ways. At home, we've revived the diaconate and are starting to foster Pastors with Alternate Training through the "PAT program."

Maybe we should become even bolder in these types of initiatives.

With some support and encouragement, our brightest people could no doubt come up with all sorts of innovative strategies. If the foundational elements are still the same—Scripture and the Confessions, and the historic pattern of worship that powers our common life—why not? Our

faith's pioneers constantly borrowed tactics, terms, and technologies from their environment.

Yet, even if we adopt both parts of the early church's double pattern our mission may not be visibly or quickly successful. Most early congregations remained tiny, scattered, and poor for generations. It took *centuries* for the Church to grow big enough to pose a significant threat to the Roman Empire's entrenched paganism. Even then, the breakthrough didn't come until the emperor Constantine became a Christian early in the 4th century. Until that happened, the Church contented itself with a much less visible position and far fewer privileges, serving the Lord within the larger society like yeast in a lump of dough (Luke 13:20-21).

Perhaps this is what lies ahead for us too. Regardless, we can be confident Christ will build His Church (Matt 16:18). As we stand firmly on the traditions we've received, while seeking the Lord's direction in adapting at least some elements from our increasingly "Gentile" context, His mission will continue to advance, here and elsewhere, until He returns. Come, Lord Jesus!

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