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John Van Dyk

Dordt College

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Church and World in Early Christianity

John Van Dyk
Professor of Philosophy



Dr. John Van Dyk received his Ph.D. in 1975 from Cornell University. The title of his doctoral dissertation is "The Value of the Commentaries on Peter Lombard's Sentences for the History of Medieval Philosophy: An Inquiry and an Assessment." Dr. Van Dyk has been a member of Dordt's faculty since 1966.

The earliest Church has always fascinated later Christians. Understandably so. After all, some seemingly unique features characterized the New Testament community. Miracles were commonly worked. The power of the Spirit was uncommonly conspicuous. The leaders of the earliest Church were disciples who had personally met or walked with the Lord. And men such as Peter and Paul appear to be in a class all by themselves. Indeed, its struggles, divisions, and failures notwithstanding, the early Church casts the kind of enduring aura of pristine zest and inspired dedication that induces many devout but disillusioned Christians, longing for the gifts of the Spirit, to call for a return to the "Apostolic Church."

But what is the Apostolic Church? To use the label "Apostolic Church" is easy enough, of course; to understand what it means, however, is another matter altogether. What was the early Church *really* like? This is no simple question. For one thing, there is the ever present tendency towards anachronism. One readily — if not inevitably — reads the results of twenty centuries of development and institutionalization back into the New Testament Church. Consequently, to Catholics the Apostolic Church is essentially an early version of the Catholic Church. Tradition, therefore, is of the utmost importance. Reformed Christians, on the other hand, tend to look at the early Church as the first example of a Reformed Church. The

Reformation, in other words, simply removed the medieval perversions and restored the Church to its original form. To many twentieth-century Reformed Christians the Apostolic Church was like unto the present Reformed Church in all things, possession of the Three Forms of Unity excepted. It seems, then, that the nature of the Apostolic Church depends on denominational viewpoints and convictions.

One needs merely to scan the vast body of New Testament scholarship to be further convinced of the difficulties in establishing the nature of the Apostolic Church. Since Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* two centuries ago an incessant stream of studies about early Christianity has appeared. Not only has the focus of investigation ranged over a myriad of problems from the quest for the historical Jesus to the phenomenal success of the Christian religion in a hostile world, but also a bewildering array of interpretations confronts us.¹

Much of this scholarship reflects theological and ecclesiastical preoccupations. As a result, a good deal of discussion about the early Church centers on questions of doctrine and Church government. Recently, however, there has developed increasing interest in approaching primitive Christianity from sociological, anthropological, and psychological viewpoints. John Gager's attempt to understand the early Church by way of a sociological model may be regarded as representative of this type of scholarship.² While efforts of this sort often fail to do justice to the theological and historical considerations, they do help to counteract, it seems to me, a powerful tendency towards reductionism.

I am referring to a two-fold reduction. The first affects the nature of the Church. The early Church is then regarded as a purely spiritual, theological,

and ecclesiastical institution without political or economic dimensions. The history of the Church, meanwhile, tends to be equated with the history of dogma or with the history of the conflict between orthodox and heretical doctrine. This common kind of reduction transforms the early Church into a doctrinal community engaged in little more than ethical behavior. The recent interest in sociological research, therefore, helps to offset the distorting effects of reducing the Apostolic Church to an organization devoted exclusively to questions of morality, doctrine, and ecclesiastical administration.

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A second, parallel reduction commonly appears. It concerns the concept "world." The battle of the early Church against the world is frequently and reductionistically interpreted as a battle against immorality³ and heresy. It is believed, as a result, that James's admonition to keep oneself unspotted from the world means no more than to avoid bad theology, sexual sin, and dishonest behavior.

These two reductions distort, I believe, our understanding not only of the early Apostolic Church but also of the nature and task of the Christian community in our twentieth century. We

do well, therefore, to consider the concepts "Church" and "world" once again. This brief essay seeks to contribute to the restoration of the larger meaning of these two words. I shall confine the focus of my discussion to the Church of the first two centuries after Christ.⁴

When Paul sends his greetings of grace and peace to the "Church" at Corinth, Thessalonica, and other places, what kind of "Church" is he addressing? Is he writing to a Church located on the corner of First and Main in Corinth? Does he direct his instructions to a group of people who file into the pews on Sunday morning and afterwards discuss the sermon over a cup of coffee and a piece of angel food cake? I doubt it very much. The word Paul uses for "Church" is *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia*, used in Periclean Athens five centuries earlier to refer to the political democratic assembly, derives from *ek-kaleo*, to call out.⁵ When Paul writes to the *ekklesia* in Corinth and other places, he addresses not just a "spiritual" association corporately visible only in Sunday services, but rather the "totality of Christians living in one place,"⁶ a community of believers called out of pagan darkness into the light of the Gospel of redemption. The *ekklesia* is the body of Christ,⁷ God's royal priesthood and holy nation,⁸ called to reconcile *all things* to God the Father through Jesus Christ.⁹ The early Church, therefore, was not merely what we now call an "ecclesiastical organization," nor was it just one institution among other institutions. Rather, the New Testament Church was a new, Spirit-gripped society within a larger pagan society, ready to confront and reform every existing institution. The *ekklesia*, as a salting salt and light on a hilltop, was called to reconcile to God the Father every relationship deformed and distorted by paganism. Driven by the vision of the coming of

God's Kingdom, the early Church sought to implement unitedly the law of love in the fullness of Greco-Roman life.

One major institution to be reformed by the *ekklesia* was the practice of worship. In the place of the idolatry of paganism the Christian Church proclaimed the worship of the true God. Instead of pagan sacrifice and ritual the *ekklesia* taught the breaking of bread and baptism. Instead of pagan temple attendance the Christians practiced the fellowship of believers. Indeed, in matters of worship the antithesis between paganism and Christianity stood out in stark relief.

But the *ekklesia* was more than a worshiping community. It constituted a political community as well.¹⁰ We tend to overlook the fact that the Christian's refusal to bow before Caesar was a political as well as a religious act. By declining to acknowledge the emperor as lord of all, the early Christian took a political stand. It must be remembered that in the Roman Empire church and state had not yet separated. Not until the reign of Constantine in the fourth century did such a separation come to pass. The early Christians recognized that political authority comes from God and is to be allotted an important place in life. Paul makes this clear in Romans 13. But when paganism distorted that political authority by associating it with emperor worship, the *ekklesia* took a firm *political* stand.

The Roman government recognized the political nature of the Christian *ekklesia*. It is common knowledge that the Romans, tolerant of all oriental religions sweeping through the Empire,¹¹ refused to tolerate Christianity. They understood the political threat of the *ekklesia* as a new society within the established order. While the reasons for Rome's persecution of the Christian Church continue to generate scholarly debate, there is general agreement that

Christianity's political threat had much to do with it.

Whatever we may think of it, the account of Acts 2 makes clear that the early *ekklesia* expressed its unity economically as well. Money was not to be a personal, private, or individual matter. The financial side of life, too, was to be addressed by the Gospel and required corporate action. The economic sharing of the *ekklesia* represented a powerful antithesis to the Roman practice of bread and circuses, which the Roman mob came to consider their right.¹² The economic character of the *ekklesia* was most keenly experienced when hostile Jews and pagans at times boycotted the commercial activity of the Christian community in various cities of the ancient world, such as Smyrna.¹³ Revelation 13 predicts that such days will come again: without the mark of the beast upon the forehead one will not be permitted to buy or sell.

In sum, it is quite erroneous to think of the early Church as an institution engaged in little more than doctrinal discussion and the combat of heresy. Such a reduction fails to do justice to the radical nature of the antithetical stand of the *ekklesia*.

In juridical affairs, too, the early *ekklesia* evoked an antithesis. This is clear from the situation in Corinth. Paul chides the Corinthian Christians for using a pagan judge to settle their disputes. With a note of impatience he asks: "How dare you take such disputes before the ungodly for judgment instead

of before the saints?"¹⁴

Other existing relationships, too, were to be touched by the healing power of the Gospel. In the institution of marriage, for example, the lines of the antithesis became sharply drawn. The early Christians took a strong stand against the practice of homosexuality, concubinage, and easy divorce, all common in the ancient world. Even in the institution of slavery the Christian Church attempted to exercise a reforming influence. True, there was no direct call for the abolition of slavery. Nevertheless, Christian slaves were to be regarded as equals within the body of Christ, and later Church councils repeatedly warned against the abuses of slavery.¹⁵

In sum, it is quite erroneous to think of the early Church as an institution engaged in little more than doctrinal discussion and the combat of heresy. Such a reduction fails to do justice to the radical nature of the antithetical stand of the *ekklesia*.¹⁶ There are indeed frequent references to "doctrine" and "teaching" in the New Testament and the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. We must not, however, interpret "doctrine" in typical Greek intellectualistic fashion, sharply divorcing "knowing" from "doing." The New Testament concept of "doctrine" is to be understood against the background of the Old Testament meaning of "knowing" as involving "doing." If doctrine is a matter of hearing and knowing but not doing, it avails nothing. Jesus reaffirms this when He says: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear God's Word and do it."¹⁷ The Apostles further insist that true insight and understanding involve action,¹⁸ that hearing without doing is mere vanity.¹⁹ Merely affirming the truth of a doctrinal statement is not enough. The Biblical meaning of "doctrine" implies not only the question, "Is

it true or false?" but also "How shall we act?" or "What must we do?"²⁰

The conflict between Church and world in early Christianity, then, was not restricted to the practice of worship and matters of morality. Rather, it was a radical conflict between two life styles, between two societies. It was a conflict between the pagan *pax Romana*, i.e., a pagan society living in a relative peace enforced by the Roman legions, and the *shalom* of reconciliation, which is a peace that passes understanding.

What can we say about the "world" which confronted the *ekklesia*? First, we must note that the earliest Christians were fully aware of the ambiguity in the term "world." They realized that, on the one hand, "world" refers to the *kosmos*, the whole of God's good creation, framed and continuously upheld by God's Word of power.²¹ On the other hand, the term "world" denotes the principle of sin. When John says, "Do not love the world," he means: "Do not love sin."

"World" in this second sense is to be seen as the opponent of the *ekklesia*. The Biblical antithesis between "Church" and "world" is the antithesis between the full-orbed *ekklesia* and the evil distortions wrought by pagan unbelief in every aspect of life and in every institutional relationship. The term "world," then, refers to sinfulness expressed not only in the conduct of individual people but also in the very structure and organization of ancient society.

In general, the "world" confronting the early Church was largely determined by two interacting forces. The first of these was the officially promoted spirit of the time, *Romanitas*. What is *Romanitas*? Literally the word means "Roman-ness" or "Romanism" or "Roman style and fashion." *Romanitas* is shorthand for the controlling commitment of Roman civilization. It was

the "cultural ideal" which was to guide the Roman Empire.²² *Romanitas* represents the coming of the Kingdom of eternal Rome. As such it stood in diametrical opposition to Christianity's driving motive of the coming of the Kingdom of God. A number of components make up the spirit of *Romanitas*. I mention three.

Basic to *Romanitas* is the faith in *Roma aeterna*. Rome is the eternal city, a state designed to last forever. In contrast, Christians asserted that a new Kingdom was in process and soon to be completed. They expected the early return of the Lord, whose coming would signal the passing of the old Rome and the arrival of the new Jerusalem.

Not only did *Romanitas* proclaim the everlasting future of the eternal city, it also gloried in its ancient heritage. The existence of Rome, it was believed, is in fact the outcome of divine destiny, and hence sanctioned by the gods. The existence of Rome is therefore a sacred existence. Vergil and Livy, two of the most influential promoters of the *Romanitas* ideal, make this very clear in their powerful and effective writings.²³ The Christians, however, contemptuously rejected the glorification of Rome's past as boastful vanity.

A third important element in *Romanitas* is the idea that Rome stands for the political union of all men and all races, one *imperium* under one emperor. The emperor personifies this union. The emperor is the state, sanctioned by the gods; hence he deserves to be worshipped. Again, the theme of divine blessing on the emperor is strong not only in the writings of Vergil and Livy, but also in those of Horace, the poet of *Romanitas*.²⁴ Rejecting emperor worship, therefore, meant the rejection of *Romanitas*.

Besides *Romanitas* a second determinant of the "world" confronting the early Church was the strong undercurrent of Greek and oriental religions

and philosophies. At times these religions tended to weaken the *Romanitas* ideal. Zoroastrian dualism, Babylonian astrology, and Chaldean mathematicism, for example, asserted a negative, not a sanctioning role of fate. At other times the eastern religions blended in harmoniously, such as the cult of Mithra, which flourished especially in the Roman army. The Greek and oriental mystery religions, particularly, were responsible for the general growth of sensuality and sexual immorality in the Roman Empire.

The spirits of *Romanitas* and orientalism gave rise to the typical pagan life style of the *pax Romana*: festivals, holy days, sacrifices, rituals, spectacles, games, chariot races and gladiatorial combat, circuses, public offices — and, therefore, politics — in service of *Roma aeterna*, education inspired by Greek philosophy,²⁵ and an economic system which, partly because of the enormous cost of maintaining the imperial trappings of the *Romanitas* ideal, failed to come to grips with the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor. All of this comprised the “world” for the early Christians, a world of pervasive paganism distorting every sector of life. It is important to see that to the *ekklesia* the “world” was not just a part or an aspect of Roman culture. Nor was it to be identified with certain kinds of practices or with institutions, leaving other practices or institutions as neutral territory where the Gospel is not relevant.²⁶ The “world” to the early Church was the totality of deformation present in every existing dimension of Roman society. A chasm both wide and deep separated the *ekklesia* from the world of *Romanitas* and orientalism. No wonder that the first-century Roman historian Tacitus refers to the Christians as “haters of mankind.” Tacitus was wrong, of course. The law of the Kingdom is love, not hate. The

Christians hated not mankind, but the life style controlled by the spirit of *Romanitas* and its oriental satellite.

One can hardly refrain from drawing a parallel at this point. In the Roman Empire the body of Christ stood antithetically over against the pagan spirit of *Romanitas* and orientalism in all its dimensions and in all its expressions. In our contemporary world new spirits have arisen, in some ways parallel to those of the ancient Roman world, and surely as powerful and pervasive. Just as *Romanitas* represented the official state-promoted life style, so a secular materialistic spirit of economism grips our western culture and is promoted by government and consumer alike. And as the oriental religions constituted an undercurrent to *Romanitas*, so the contemporary search for the security of drugs, astrology, mysticism, or eastern religions underlies western industrial society. The question must be asked: Where is the *ekklesia* today? Is it bottled up in its institutionalized embodiment, to be kept strictly separate from the state and a host of other sectors of society, or is it, like the Apostolic *ekklesia* of old, a body of Christ ready to combat the world not only within the walls of the instituted church but on *all* fronts?

We cannot return to the Apostolic Church. We cannot reverse the movement of time. The early Apostolic Church existed as a phase in history, irretrievably past. But while there is little or no point to preaching the return to the Apostolic Church, it *is* extremely worthwhile to ask the question: What was the early Church and how did it confront the world? A search for the answer reveals the reductionism that tends to paralyze contemporary Christianity and render it impotent. If “Church” is reduced to institution and “world” to immorality, then indeed, while much good can still be done, the

Christian Gospel is prevented from touching the very structures of our deformed society. The Church is more than an institution. True, it comes to institutional expression as a worship community. But it is also to be the salting salt in a world that has lost its God-intended flavor. And "world," unfortunately, means much more than heresy and immorality. True, there is no shortage of immorality. But let the rampant immorality of our time not blind us to the larger "world" inherent in the economic, political, and social perversions of our age.

The reduction of Church and world is undoubtedly one of Satan's most effective weapons: it truncates the task of God's people and it allows much sin to pass as perfectly normal.

Notes

¹For a good survey of the shifting interpretations, see W. G. Kümmel's *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972).

²John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975). For an example of a psychological approach to the study of the Church in the third and fourth centuries, see E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

³The term "immorality" is notoriously vague. I am using it here in its traditional, limited sense of impure conduct or behavior.

⁴For a discussion of the development of these two reductions, see my essay "From Deformation to Reformation" in *Will All the King's Men* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972), pp. 63-91.

⁵*Ekklesia* derives from *ek-kaleo* via *ekkletos*. See H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., revised and augmented by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), pp. 508-509.

⁶W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 240, under *ekklesia*, 4, b, where, e.g., I Cor. 1:2, II Cor. 1:1, I Thes. 1:1 and II Thes. 1:1 are cited as examples.

⁷Eph. 1:22, 23.

⁸I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:4-6, 5:10.

⁹II Cor. 5:17-19 and Col. 1:19,20. The expression "all things" (*Gr. panta*) as a description of Christ's total redemption and the scope of the Christian task is a recurrent theme in the New Testament (e.g., Rom. 11:36, I Cor. 8:6, Eph. 1:10, Col. 1:16, Heb. 2:10), and one which is, reductionistically, all too frequently neglected or ignored altogether.

¹⁰For a thought-provoking discussion of this point, see A. F. Gedraitis, *Worship and Politics* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972), pp. 39-78. See also the section entitled "The Church as a Political Society" in René de Visme Williamson's book *Independence and Involvement. A Christian Reorientation in Political Science* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), pp. 172-181.

¹¹H. Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 25.

¹²M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), II, 81.

¹³Compare Rev. 2:9.

¹⁴I Cor. 6:1-6.

¹⁵For a brief and accurate description of the early Church's attitude towards marriage and slavery, see H. R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1976), pp. 37-38.

¹⁶Compare II Cor. 6:14-7:1.

¹⁷Luke 8:19.

¹⁸e.g., Eph. 5:15-17, Jas. 3:13. Compare Psalm 111:10, 119:100.

¹⁹Jas. 1:22-25.

²⁰Compare Luke 3:10-14, Acts 2:37.

²¹John 1:1-3, Heb. 1:3, 11:3, II Pet. 3:5.

²²For further discussion of *Romanitas* as a cultural ideal in imperial Rome, see C. N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 1-114.

²³R. H. Barrow, *The Romans* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1949); J. W. Duff, *A Literary History of Rome*, 3rd ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), I, 84-89, 337, 474.

²⁴Duff, I, 383-85.

²⁵For an illuminating account of the conflict between Christian and pagan education, see M. L. W. Laistner, *Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951).

²⁶Not until synthesis with Greek philosophy set in did Christianity permit "neutral" areas. But once such synthesis begins, e.g., with Justin Martyr, the antithesis is reduced to certain kinds of immoral practices, leaving room for a supposed neutral area of intellectual activity.