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TRANSLATING THE MESSAGE

The Missionary Impact on Culture

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Revised and Expanded

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The Birth of Mission

The Jewish-Gentile Frontier

> The Gospel because it was the message of God to humanity, could daily reveal itself in the simplest of garments. . . . The complicated is immobile, the simple is mobile. . . . The New Testament, as is proved also by its language, was ordained for a destiny, the like of which no work which originated in the high literary culture has had, or could have had. . . . This simple book, with its carpenter's and tentmaker's language, was a book for all, and it could resound, unadulterated to humanity in all centuries, the message of the Gospel which had moved men in a small corner of the Mediterranean World. . . . The New Testament has become the Book of the Peoples because it began by being the Book of the People. (Deissmann 1929, 95, 106, 136)

Our first subject of consideration is how in the first century of Christianity Jew and Gentile became religiously interchangeable — a move that mitigated Jewish exclusiveness while it also dismantled the Gentile impediment. How Jew and Gentile stood together and separately under the radical affirmation of God's action in Jesus is a fundamental issue for the emergence of Christianity as an intercultural global movement, an experience that shaped Jewish and Greek converts in their different and complementary ways. Jewish converts acknowledged equality with Gentiles — they ate at the same table — while Gentile converts assimilated into the language of the covenant as adopted children of Abraham. As Peter assured his incredulous Gentile audience: "Once you were no people but now you are God's people" (1 Pet. 2:20). Contrary to usage and to millennia of hallowed tradition, Gentiles, too, Peter persisted, are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, thanks to the God who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light. It suggests a radical pluralism with theological roots. Yet, because this pluralism determines what social arrangements are appropriate for it, its historical implications are unmistakable. Accordingly, this chapter will combine history and theology to explore the question upon which everything else in this book rests.

THE JEWISH FACTOR

The Jewish strand is a recurring theme in the rise and expansion of Christianity and was both source and influence in the development of mission. In the first place Christian mission was a stream that flowed into the low ground leveled by Jewish religious life. In origin, Christian mission was a movement conditioned by the atmosphere of the Diaspora, and the rewards it reaped were prepared in that soil. In the second place, the inner reality of Gentile Christianity had the special mark of the Jewish experience stamped upon it as a sign and a safeguard: as a sign because of its undeniable debt to its Jewish precursor, and as a safeguard because of the immense Gentile vistas now beckoning beyond the hallowed horizons of Moses, synagogue, and lineage. The tensions on the Jewish-Gentile frontier stemmed from the nature of the special relationship existing between the early Christians and the Jews of the Diaspora.

When the apostles embarked on mission as a direct obligation of the gospel, the first groups of people to whom they directed their message were Jews, Jewish proselytes, or Gentiles nurtured in the favorable atmosphere of Jewish presuppositions (e.g., Acts 10:22). Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that the plan of a worldwide mission was one that Jesus did not explicitly command, for Jesus confined his preaching to his fellow countrymen and women. Yet all scholars are undivided about the vigorous course that the Gentile mission took, and the universal assumption of the apostles that such a development was fully consistent with the mind and intention of the now exalted Christ who was also the coming Messiah. Evidence of the Jewish background of the missionary movement can be found in the prominence given to the messiahship of Jesus, his certain return, and the equally certain establishment of the kingdom in the foreseeable future. The explicit words of Jesus confirm the Jewish intentions of his ministry (Matt. 10:5–6, 23). Even the historical setting of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16–18) makes it clear that Galilee and the immediate countryside were to be the center of preaching and witness. Israel remained the focus and center of Jesus' thinking and teaching. Accordingly, the arrival of the kingdom would occur on home territory, and the apostles wished to be eyewitnesses of that climactic event.

At a fairly early stage, however, the disciples reached a turning point in the direction of Christian preaching, and the transition from the Jewish to the Gentile mission became a natural one for the church. The pressure to expand the work beyond Jerusalem and the northern hill district of Galilee had been building since the momentous events of the passion week of Jesus, with the agonizing climax of the crucifixion as the point of no return. All concerned looked forward to the time when the long-awaited messianic event would take place. Once their resolve was galvanized by the resurrection experience, the apostles and the sympathizers of Jesus went about their business of testifying to the Messiah in his glorified power, and they did this with unbounded confidence. In fact, the accounts portray their exploits with the facility of a déjà vu: the events of conversion and progress into new fields were the fulfillment of promises made by Jesus Christ during his

earthly ministry, and that retrospective view was validated by what was taking place before their own eyes. In undertaking mission, therefore, the apostles were keeping the intimate company of their Lord and Master. Adolf von Harnack has rightly observed that mission issued from the overwhelming logic of the religion and spirit of Jesus, whatever the situation with regard to any explicit command on the matter. I quote his words:

> One might even argue that the universal mission was an inevitable issue of the religion and spirit of Jesus, and that its origin, not only apart from any direct word of Jesus, but in verbal contradiction to several of his sayings, is really a stronger testimony to the method, the strength, and the spirit of his preaching than if it were the outcome of a deliberate command. (Harnack 1908, 1:37)

We might ask how, precisely, it came about that Christianity breached its Judaic walls and swept upon the Gentile world. For answers, we should inquire into the internal conditions of the new religion as well as the external circumstances, and in both cases pay special attention to the underlying Jewish theme.

INTERNAL CONDITIONS FOR MISSION

It is clear that in the lifetime of Jesus the disciples were gripped by a sense of the impending end of the age. Life, they believed, was a journey, and as they neared the time when the end was in view they felt under increasing pressure to make necessary preparation to meet that deadline. The earliest message of this missionary vocation is enshrined in Matthew 10:7ff. It was a matter of literal truth that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, and its heralds strove to prepare people for this event. People were told to pay heed to the approaching cataclysm and to flee while there was time. In the *Didache,* for example, a document reputedly of the second century, Christians are warned to "be watchful over your life; never let your lamps go out or your loins be ungirt, but keep yourself always in readiness, for you can never be sure of the hour when our Lord may be coming. . . ."[1] The sentiment has primitive roots. Peter warns the believers that the day of the Lord will come like a thief "when the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:10). Judgment was about to engulf the world just as the sickle is put to a field ready for the harvest, and that judgment will begin with the household of God (1 Pet. 4:17). There was a resolute conviction about the path of mission as a costly, perilous one, and about those perils as incontrovertible evidence of the ripeness of the age for swift judgment. Thus, suffering and opposition became the sources of inner strength for the task of mission.

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1. *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers,* trans. Maxwell Staniforth (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1968, reprinted by Penguin Books, 1982), 235.

There was, furthermore, an ethical reward for the burden of mission. Those who denied themselves worldly comforts in order to put their hand to the plow would be rewarded with the incorruptible trophy of membership in the kingdom of heaven. The notion of recompense was the linchpin of the missionary endeavor, as indeed it was of the primitive church. The obligation to preach and spread the message, the call to renounce the world and create a messianic community, and the belief that people were living in a provisional passing age — all this fused with the principle of recompense.

The reward of the kingdom is the imperishable inheritance, "undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you," Peter, the prince of apostles, assured (1 Pet. 1:4). Trials and tribulations would fade in comparison to the gift of salvation about which the prophets searched and inquired. Set apart, believers were distinct from the world; they constituted a nursery community of hope, and lived as the children of the kingdom, people whose citizenship was in heaven (Heb. 13:14). They were aliens and exiles (1 Pet. 2:11). All worldly events pointed to the hastening of the millennium. The principle of faith and devotion to one God was fixed on the idea of giving account soon of the hope the believers received. The sovereign rule of the moral law would be vindicated decisively in the final reign of God when all routes of escape would be blocked, and the rule of righteousness established "on the day of visitation" (1 Pet. 2:12). All would receive their just reward.

This vision of the kingdom infused a powerful sense of ethical seriousness into earthly conduct. How people treated each other; how they acquired and disposed of their wealth; how they lived in the world; what motives existed for their actions; and how they practiced restraint, forgiveness, and charity toward others were all governed by the certainty that the kingdom of God would appear in the foreseeable future — perhaps in the lifetime of many (1 Thess. 4:16–18; 5:1–28). No one took the world as seriously as those who were called to make war upon it. God as Judge and Savior not only ensured the rule of justice and faith in redemptive steadfastness, but also called forth a sense of righteousness and trust in God's salvific promise. Accordingly, earthly existence had cast upon it this inexorable pressure to rise to the highest standards of the ethical life. God would not permit earthly powers of folly to frustrate the plan of salvation even if God's rebuke were to come by way of a dumb ass speaking with a human voice in order to restrain the recalcitrant (2 Pet. 2:16). Christian eschatology is not the same as ethical anarchy, the apostles insisted.

The disciples understood mission as the urgent scramble to abandon the world and to prepare for the great denouement. Psychologically, mission stressed the idea of individual responsibility, which heightened the sense of fear, isolation, and insecurity. It sought to meet this individual crisis by offering security, assurance, and the safety of a redeemed and supportive fellowship. The individual disposition of fear and anxiety was turned into an attitude of faith and trust, with reliance on such inner fortitude in a menacing world. Instead of being conformed

to the world and to its beguiling temptations, Christians looked forward to the reign of God as their final vindication.

Mission threw up a sense of genuine community. The idea of the kingdom was at bottom the idea of a fellowship that was chastened, redeemed, and elected to exhibit the marks of love and forgiveness. The sense of God's reality was intertwined with the ethical life of the fellowship of believers who could be identified by their confessional separation from the world. The fellowship was the representative humanity, the sign of the family of God.

Such a stringent view of mission might appear to represent a new point of departure, yet it still presented the early disciples as a subapostolate of the wider Jewish religious activity. In the commissioning of the twelve apostles, for example, Jesus commands them to be scrupulous in restricting their mission to a branch of the Jewish tribes and to refrain from any missionary contact with Gentiles (Matt. 10:5–6). In the interlude between the ascension and Pentecost, to take another example, Jesus commands the apostles to await the promise in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4), and leads them further to believe that the familiar world of Judaism would be the permissible limits of their preaching (Acts 1:8).

In all this material, the followers of Jesus appear as just an offshoot of the Jewish dispensation. At this stage, the disciples assumed — or were led to assume — that the Gentile world was peripheral to the purposes of God. The ringing assertions of Jesus about the law, salvation, the kingdom, and the power of God left a deafening echo in the ears of his disciples, and only a few could hear the full cross-cultural Gentile implications of the Master's preaching. For many of them the teaching of Jesus remained in continuity with the Judaic heritage and the place of the synagogue in that.

For instance, E. P. Sanders believes that Jesus was a prophet of restoration eschatology, preaching the imminent reassembling of the twelve tribes of Israel. Sanders interprets the work of John the Baptist, who called Israel to repentance, as forming a necessary background to the restoration hopes of Jesus, hopes that grew out of the general stream of Jewish religious life. Although Sanders courts criticism with his concentration on the acts of Jesus, particularly the temple incident with the money changers (Mark 11:15–18), to the neglect of Jesus' words and teaching or of the cross, his attempt to place the work of Jesus within Judaism is a valid one (see Sanders 1985).

Upon its inner resources the primitive missionary community carried the distinguishing sign of its Judaic heritage. The apostles believed that, having set up Abraham as the irrevocable standard of faith and obedience, God had defended that with the ultimate price of the cross, a price mysteriously prefigured in the act of Abraham himself to agree to surrender totally and unreservedly Isaac, his beloved son (Heb. 11:17; Gen. 22:9–12).

Missionary preaching, however, entered a significant stage when Jesus was presented as the Messiah *and* Son of God, glorified in the cross and exalted on God's right hand, from where he would come to judge the world as Messiah. In his earthly life Jesus was perceived as a rabbi, the great teacher who taught

in parables and by extended disputations on the law. In that role he carried the distinguishing marks of a Jewish religious teacher, and his actions were explicable only by reference to his Jewish heritage.

For a significant number of his compatriots it was incontestably the case that Jesus was the healer and wonder-worker par excellence, a reputation that understandably earned him the implacable enmity of the authorities who made a careful distinction between religion and the irrational. Yet to his close circle of disciples, such supernatural feats merely confirmed Jesus' rabbinic authority, and they continued to regard him as the superlative teacher, the one who opened people's eyes and ears to the wisdom enshrined in the Torah. It is obvious that in the post-resurrection fellowship of the disciples, this rabbinic strand formed an unbroken knot in the missionary net that was spread to embrace a much wider audience. In the testimony of Stephen, for example, the significance of the life of Jesus is expounded as a consistent theme that reaches back to Abraham and the subsequent course of that peculiar history (Acts 7). All this implies the exemplary centrality of Jewish culture for the new religion, and hints at the radical revolution involved in the Gentile breakthrough.

The change that came upon the disciples can best be understood in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection. The shift in understanding was not so much a shift in the structure of religious belief (one God, Judge and Ruler; the judgment and the coming of the kingdom; and the special ethical code based on the Torah and nurtured in the synagogue) as in the terms of that structure. Jesus the rabbi had become Jesus the Messiah, both ideas firmly rooted in Jewish tradition. In the hands of the apostles, however, the earthly Jesus was the promised Messiah. For them a familiar religious title bore a revolutionary meaning, which was subtly intimated by the revolutionary expectations of political liberation. Furthermore, God the Ruler and Judge acquired new meaning in light of the redemptive ministry of Jesus and his teachings about the kingdom. Once the step was taken, it felt natural in the minds of believers that the law and the prophets pointed with authoritative assurance to where the apostles stood in relation to the glorified and risen Savior. Rudolf Bultmann, who is inclined to stress a gradual development in apostolic thought on this question, suggests enough to warrant the view that a definite change, if not already there, was certainly under way. He describes it thus:

> The proclamation of Jesus as Messiah or Son of Man keeps quite within the frame of Jewish eschatological expectation. . . . However much his preaching in its radicality is directed against Jewish legalism, still its content is nothing else than true Old Testament — Jewish faith in God radicalized in the direction of the great prophets' preaching. And though it surpasses the latter in its individualization of man's relations to God, because it places not the People but first of all the individual into the immediate presence of God, and because it views not the people's future but God's Reign as the eschatological salvation, still even in that is only the consummation of

> tendencies that underlie the preaching of the great prophets. The concepts of God, world, and man, of law and grace, of repentance and forgiveness in the teaching of Jesus are not new in comparison with those of the Old Testament and Judaism, however radically they may be understood. And his critical interpretation of the Law, in spite of its radicality, likewise stands within the scribal discussion about it, just as his eschatological preaching does within Jewish apocalyptic. (Bultmann 1951–55, 1:33–34, 35)

Harnack follows a similar trail when he looks at the characteristics of the missionary preaching to the Gentiles. His list draws heavily on the contribution of law and synagogue, particularly the uncompromising worship of one God. Paul reminds and exhorts his audience in Corinth and Thessalonika that when they heard the message they turned from idols and images to serve the one, living God of apostolic preaching (1 Cor. 12:2; 1 Thess. 1:9–10). In this regard Harnack observes: "The 'living and true God' is the first and final thing; the second is Jesus, the Son of God, the judge, who secures us against the wrath to come, and who is therefore 'Jesus the Lord.' To the living God, now preached to all men, we owe faith and devoted service; to God's Son as Lord, our due is faith and hope" (Harnack 1908, 1:89).

As confirmed by the cataclysmic events of passion week (which coincided with the Jewish Passover feast) and their unexpected outcome on Easter Sunday, the ethical seriousness of missionary preaching turned on the assured coming of Jesus as Messiah to reign in the kingdom. In retrospect, even Easter, for all its dramatic unexpectedness, falls into a familiar pattern, affording historical veracity to the principle of Jewish messianic faith. The significant difference is that the messianic kingdom is a spiritual kingdom in deep tension with the kingdom of Caesar.

The significance of perceiving Jesus as God's exalted became the gravitational force of the new world of faith and devotion. It gave an otherworldly direction to Christian life and devotion, with faith in the absolute righteousness of God finding its corollary in the provisional, relative character of this world. It opened the way for pluralism by stressing the nonabsolute character and coequality of all earthly arrangements. What one authority calls "the Easter faith" of the believers exerted a broadening pressure on the inherited boundaries of Jewish ritual fellowship to furnish the principle of membership in the fellowship by faith only. The Gentile breakthrough established a new watermark for religion, and it did so swamping the great landmark of Jewish faithfulness; and the elaborate, sophisticated footwork of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans and to the Galatians in particular shows how he and others assumed the Judaic theme to be an integral part of the gospel proclamation. The people of Jesus inherited in Christ an extended worldwide family of faith.

We need not be dogmatic about whether apostolic preaching adopted or abandoned the Jewish conception of the divine commonwealth in order to agree that

the apostolic insight was developed in intimate closeness to that conception. In the final analysis, membership of the kingdom remained the divine plan of salvation, the radical difference being that faith rather than a racially based ritual order was the qualification.[2] This "Easter faith" became the all-powerful force in energizing the body of believers. The inner dynamism of the new mission was fed from this primal source, and Christians would not rest until all the terrain they left behind was realigned appropriately. So stay in Jerusalem they did.

THE EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES

The Jerusalem sojourn was an essential preparation for the defining outreach to the wider Gentile world. The Christian movement was known among the Jews as the Nazarene sect, and the Christians as the Nazarenes. Now, however, imbued with an intense conviction in Jesus as Lord and Savior, the shadows of the Temple could afford the congenial shelter only of an incubation niche, and before long the Nazarenes emerged with a new identity as "Christians," a Greek term first given to them in Antioch (Acts 11:26). Many in the Jewish party in the church who until then enjoyed great influence and authority objected to the Gentile move, and eventually seceded from the church to form a community of their own, known as the Ebionites. They upheld the Mosaic code and hoped for the Messiah to come. Their rupture with the apostles, however, indicates that the church understood itself as an open community marked by faith in Christ who was the vindicated Messiah (Eusebius 1984, 136ff., 256; Gibbon, n.d., 1:678; 2:806–7; "Ebionism," 1981). There was thus something corresponding to a spontaneous and almost abrupt force about the thrust of Christianity into the Greek-speaking world and beyond.

In spite of the growing divergence with Temple religious life, however, important factors of unity and continuity persisted. Even when it ostensibly repudiated Judaism, primitive Christianity stood firmly within the Jewish orbit. As Gilbert Murray (1866–1957), the English classical scholar and statesman, once put it, "Christianity, apart from its positive doctrines, had inherited from Judaism the noble courage of its disbeliefs" (Ferguson 1970, 224). For his part, Gibbon expressed it thus:

> The primitive Christians were possessed with an unconquerable repugnance to the use and abuse of images; and this aversion may be ascribed to their descent from the Jews, and their enmity to the Greeks. The Mosaic law had severely proscribed all representations of the Deity; and that precept was firmly established in the principles and practice of the chosen people. (Gibbon, n.d., 3:1)

2. I owe these and other thoughts on this theme to Helmut Koester of Harvard University and to Dieter Georgi of the University of Frankfurt, in personal communication.

Christian opposition to idolatry, the commitment to the oneness of God, and to the towering sovereignty of the moral and ethical code demonstrated the continuity of key elements of Jewish religious teaching. All three aspects of that commitment were raised on Jewish foundations, and they marked the inner safeguard of the new religion on its winding course through the mainland of the Pax Romana.

In availing itself of the outward advantages afforded by the administration and climate of the empire, primitive Christianity gravitated toward the communities of the Diaspora ensconced in the empire. These communities were strategically located in areas of learning and prosperity, from the Tigris and Euphrates valleys to Spain and beyond. There was a powerful and prosperous community in Rome itself. The influence of that Roman Jewish community can be gauged from numerous converts made from the many religions existing under imperial aegis. For example, the Roman authorities, including Seneca, complained bitterly about the inroads that Jewish worship was making into the citizenry, threatening the efficacy, if not the collapse of the state-sponsored cults.

In following the trails of the Jewish Diaspora, the Christians also learned to replicate in the church the vigorous Hellenistic movement that reached an advanced stage in the synagogue. Evidence of this can be seen in the creation of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the five books of Moses, and in the use of Greek in synagogue life. Its most brilliant individual representative was Philo of Alexandria, a figure of immense importance for the Hellenization of Judaism (see Winston 1981). Steeped in the best of Greek culture, Philo, who was active in the early part of the first century, achieved a brilliant synthesis of Greek learning and Jewish religious principles. For example, he adopted the Greek idea of *logos* (on which, more in chapter 2 below) and employed it to bridge the gulf between an uncompromising monotheism and a Platonism that excludes divine agency in the material sphere, finite and imperfect as that sphere is. The use of the *logos* concept was " master-stroke. For here in one concept are fused the Jewish *memra,* the word of God ('God said Let there be light, and there was light'), the late Jewish Wisdom, as seen in *Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiasticus* and *Wisdom,* the Platonic doctrine of Forms, the Aristotelian doctrine of the Divine Intellect, and the Stoic Divine Reason; the ambiguity of meaning in Logos between word and reason made it an especially convenient term" for Christians (Ferguson 1970, 224).

One particularly fruitful field for radical appropriation in Christianity was Gnostic teaching.[3] Scholars are of the opinion that the Gospel of John was the most ambitious attempt in Scripture to assimilate the Gnostic system — or at any rate, even if the internal evidence is less conclusive, Gnostics and heterodox Christians found plenty in that Gospel to support their interest. The Gospel may, accordingly, be seen as the leading document, along with the Epistles of John and

3. On Gnosticism, see the classic work by Hans Jonas, first published in 1958, with a second, enlarged edition in 1963.

the book of Revelation, which testifies to the church's spiritual and intellectual encounter with Gnosticism. It is possible that many believers who at first sympathized with the esoteric sentiments expressed in parts of John's Gospel and then subsequently identified themselves with mainstream Christianity continued to think in terms of the Gnostic paradigm with its emphasis on a preexistent being and on devotees sharing in that preexistent source. One writer who has developed this idea in terms of a special Johannine community is the Roman Catholic scholar Raymond E. Brown, who quotes a Gnostic adept as having declared about this preexistent principle, "I derive being from Him who is preexistent and return to my own place from which I came forth" (cited in Brown, 1979, 151). The inclusion in the Christian canon of the Johannine corpus, so different in tone and temper from the Synoptics, shows the lengths to which the community of believers went in its practice of translatability.

Gnosticism is basically the philosophical system (or systems) that rests upon a metaphysical dualism between the spiritual and the material, between soul and body, between metaphysical truth and phenomenal representation, between light and darkness. The great Prologue of John's Gospel, for example, is steeped in Gnostic ideas, with the theme of light and darkness emerging as a central issue in terms of which the life and work of Jesus is expounded. Basilides, a Gnostic teacher of Alexandria who was active there round about A.D. 130, declared that while he and his followers "were no longer Jews, they were more than Christians" (Frend 1984, 205ff.). In expanding on his position, Basilides reveals the extent of his Gnostic sympathies by declaring:

> In the beginning there were light and darkness. . . . When each of these came to recognition of the other, and the darkness contemplated the light, the darkness, as if seized with desire of the better thing, pursued after it, and desired to be mingled with it and to participate in it. But while the darkness did this, the light by no means received anything of the darkness into itself, nor desired anything of it, albeit it too suffered the desire to behold. So it beheld the darkness as if in a mirror. . . . Hence there is no perfect good in this world, and what there is of good at all is very little. . . . Nevertheless by reason of this little bit of light, or rather of this sort of appearance of light, the creatures had power to generate a likeness tending towards that admixture which they had conceived from the light. (Dodd 1953, 103–4; see Pagels 1973)

It would be a mistake, however, to say that John's Gospel was in any consistent fashion a Gnostic book, for, as Dodd has pointed out, *"Gnosis* is not in fact so much a knowledge *of God,* in any profoundly religious sense, as knowledge *about* the structure of the higher world and the way to get there" (Dodd 1953, 101). At the heart of John's Gospel, by contrast, lies a profoundly theological concern. The Gnostic tension with Christianity arises from the attempt to turn Christianity into a religion of "secret discourses" entrusted to the specially instructed, a fact that conflicts with the public and community thrust of the gospel proclamation

(Mark 4:22; Luke 8:17; 11:33; John 7:4; 18:20; see Pannenberg 1969, 149ff.). Whatever the case, as the Nag Hammadi documents indicate, Gnosticism was a powerful movement that left an indelible mark on second-century Christianity.[4]

So far as Paul's acquaintance with the whole Alexandrian school of Gnosticism is concerned, the preponderant weight of scholarly opinion is against it, so that we cannot with any degree of confidence claim that Paul knew of Philo's work. On the other hand, when it comes to John the evangelist and his closeness to Alexandrian influences, a less hesitant assertion has been entered, as pointed out in Moffatt's brilliant synthesis of the evidence (Moffatt 1918/1981, 522ff.). In any case, the advanced level of a Hellenized Judaism constituted a readily accessible precedent for the new religion of Christianity, and certainly Philo's philosophical achievement, with its intricate allegorical method, would be extremely attractive for Christians engaged in interpretation and exchange. The ground, appropriately elevated by the worshipers of a strict monotheism such as the Jews were, was suffused with the harmonizing effects of Gnostic ideas and learning, ready to receive the Christian input. Thus the impulse of mission had been significantly stirred by the stimulus of Jewish and Gnostic elements, and the Christian wave merged with these before its own tide swept it in a different direction. In this sense the Diaspora was important in facilitating the implantation of Christian communities throughout the empire, as the following observations make clear:

> To the Jewish mission which preceded it, the Christian mission was indebted, in the first place, for a field tilled all over the empire; in the second place, for religious communities already formed everywhere in the towns; thirdly for what Axenfeld calls "the help of materials" furnished by the preliminary knowledge of the Old Testament, in addition to the catechetical and liturgical materials which could be employed without much alteration; fourthly, for the habit of regular worship and a control of private life; fifthly, for an impressive apologetic on behalf of monotheism, historical teleology, and ethics; and, finally, for the feeling that self-diffusion was a duty. The amount of this debt was so large, that one might venture to claim the Christian mission was a continuation of the Jewish propaganda. (Harnack 1908, 1:15)

In following a parallel course with Judaism, Christian mission also came to make use of the arrangements that existed under the Roman civilization. In the first place, a Hellenizing movement had taken place in the length and breadth of the empire, and this produced a unity of language and ideas that gave form and shape to the Christian expansion. In the second place, Roman administrative and

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4. See Frend 1984, 195ff.; Jonas 1963, 290–319; for a rigorous examination of the theme in the writings of the church fathers, and for an examination of the comparative Islamic tradition, the reader may wish to consult Smith 1976.

political institutions, and the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the empire, encouraged social and intellectual exchange.

> The exceptional facilities, growth and security of international traffic: the admirable roads; the blending of different nationalities; the interchange of wares and ideas; the personal intercourse; the ubiquitous merchant and soldier — one may add, the ubiquitous professor, who was to be encountered from Antioch to Cadiz, from Alexandria to Bordeaux. The church thus found the way paved for expansion: the means were prepared; and the population of the large towns was as heterogeneous and devoid of a past as could be desired. (Harnack 1908, 1:20–21)

There was, in addition, a significant deposit of Roman ideas of jurisprudence, human rights and duties, court procedures, a spirit of administrative impartiality, and a liberal philosophical outlook, which all helped to acclimatize Christianity in the empire. "On all essential questions the church had no reason to oppose, but rather to assent to, Roman law, that grandest and most durable product of the empire" (Harnack 1908, 1:21).

The religious policy of the empire redounded to the benefit of the church. The toleration shown toward all religions, including Christianity, removed costly obstacles in the path of initial introduction, and although Christian preaching was required to observe the rule of no offense to the state religion, no disabilities were incurred for being a Christian. The ground was being laid for the inward transformation that gave Christianity a fresh language and new historical direction.

Infused with a sense of mission the Christian movement took the tradition of worship of one God and spread it in the empire and beyond. Indeed, Gibbon writes about the comparative freedom of Christians in the first hundred years since the death of Christ when "the disciples of the Messiah were indulged in a freer latitude both of faith and practice than has ever been allowed in succeeding ages" (Gibbon n.d., 1:393). Like the Jews before them, Christians were able to gain recognition for themselves, although they stuck to the line of rejecting idol worship and making offerings to the emperor. Even the tragic events of the Neronic persecution, in which both Peter and Paul were reported to have perished, failed to destroy Christian confidence, for the outrages could be attributed to the excesses of one man (Gibbon n.d., 1:460). Persecution did continue in Rome and elsewhere, but the younger Pliny, for example, reporting to the emperor Trajan (about A.D. 110), said he was careful to observe standard safeguards in extracting confessions. As the provincial governor of Bithynia, where he was appointed ca. A.D. 85, he sent to Rome for trial the cases of those Christians entitled to the privileges of Roman citizenship.

Polytheism was a source of friction, and Christians suffered for refusing to worship other gods (Gibbon n.d., 1:396–98), but, as Tacitus reported of Nero's bitter persecution, the fate of Christians "aroused compassion" among the general populace. Commenting on persecutions in the primitive church, Helmut Koester,

in a personal communication (1985) to the author, observed that only in the middle of the third century, with the measures of Decius in 251, was what he called "Christianity as a whole" affected. As is argued in chapter 2 below, the organizational power of Christian religious and social life in time provoked intervention from political authorities. If such organizational power was achieved no earlier than the third century, it would explain why official persecution commenced when it did. The comprehensive measures reflected the scale of organized life Christianity had by then achieved.

Christian preaching inspired and in turn received great encouragement from the steadfastness of believers, and the general conditions of life more than offset the setbacks of withdrawal from state ceremonies. This was indubitably the case with regard to the organizational life of Christians. There were in existence numerous official and voluntary associations on both the municipal and provincial levels, and when the need arose to organize believers, these organizations furnished the necessary models and parallels. The enormous heavy burden of having to design new forms of church life and securing general acceptance for them was averted even before it was confronted (Gibbon n.d., 1:420).

The general democratic leveling of society provided its own peculiar stimulus. In many respects the old order had changed under the equalizing pressure of the *cives Romani,* which embraced provincials, Greeks, and barbarians. The upshot was a cosmopolitan atmosphere highly conducive to sentiments of individual feeling and choice. The Christian preaching did not hinder this; on the contrary, it encouraged and intensified it.

There was, furthermore, an expectant mood among the citizenry, which took a deeply religious turn just as Christianity was appearing on the scene. Exposure to the ritual ceremonies of the state fed the appetite for religious innovation. Participation in the state religion aroused feelings of devotion and curiosity, which spread beyond the limits of state sponsorship and provision. As cogently argued by Franz Cumont in his *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism,* there was an influx of Syrian and Persian religious materials into the empire, and this oriental stream met and elevated the desultory outpourings of state ceremonials. Its appetite awakened, the empire fed on a titillating blend of familiar and strange notions, as carefully documented by John Ferguson in *The Religions of the Roman Empire*. The imperial venture that conflicted with Rome's own republican ideals fostered a religious eclecticism inimical to establishment morality.

Yet the combined and cumulative effect introduced a keen personal note into religious inquiry, and although not all of that was conducive to sound morals, it undoubtedly sharpened the awareness of thoughtful people, some of whom were high state officials. The proliferation of religious cults, especially of the healing variety, and the continuing attempt to rank idols in a hierarchy dictated by the formal preeminence of Jupiter, pointed people toward the monotheist ideal and the hope for a savior able to satisfy personal cravings. All this was propitious ground for Christian preaching. Harnack sums up these factors thus:

> By the blending of states and nations, which coalesced to form a universal empire, cosmopolitanism had become a reality. But there was always a reverse side to cosmopolitanism, viz., individualism. . . . There was a real demand for *purity, consolation,* and *healing,* and as these could not be found elsewhere, they began to be sought in religion. (Harnack 1908, 1:105)

Wrapping itself round its Judaic roots and taking shelter under the liberal climate of Roman imperial administration, the Christian missionary movement thrived from a double advantage. The energy of the missionary movement, with its source in membership of the eschatological congregation, flowed unobtrusively into the dynamism of Roman imperial power. The successful assimilation of Christianity in the Constantinian era (from A.D. 312), overlapping with the ebb of eschatological excitement, altered the missionary momentum, and a period of steady consolidation followed, reaching a high point during the pontificate of Gregory the Great (from A.D. 591). Although church and mission developed by different impulses, mission conveyed the materials upon which the church drew for its life and work. (Franciscan missions between 1250 and 1350 carried the missionary impetus forward beyond the barriers erected by the Crusades. The bubonic plagues in 1347 and 1365, however, were a tragic setback for medieval church and society. The expanding cultural borders of Europe, for example, which were the result of Franciscan missions in Mongolia and China, shriveled, and when in the sixteenth century Europe rose to maritime preeminence it had little cultural memory of that era. It filled the vacuum with mission as a mere commercial appendage.) In the classical world, mission subsisted on the signs of vitality in ancient life, and reconstructed from the old materials an achievement that simultaneously advanced the Christian cause and revitalized the best in the old. Mission was thus both an advance and a completion in the perspective of the older dispensation of Roman paganism. Ulhorn, writing in 1882, puts the case succinctly, although he remained mesmerized by the idea of Christianity encountering a less than equal resistance. He urges us to see:

> From the time of the emperors onwards a new influence made itself felt, and unless we notice this influence, we cannot understand the first centuries of the early Christian church, we cannot understand its rapid extension and its relatively rapid triumph. . . . Had the stream of new life issuing from Christ encountered ancient life when the latter was still unbroken, it would have recoiled impotent from the shock. But ancient life had by this time begun to break up; its solid foundations had begun to weaken; and, besides, the Christian stream fell in with a previous and cognate current of Jewish opinion. In the Roman empire there had already appeared a universalism foreign to the ancient world. Nationalities had been effaced. The idea of universal humanity had disengaged itself from that of nationality. (Cited by Harnack 1908, 1:22n)

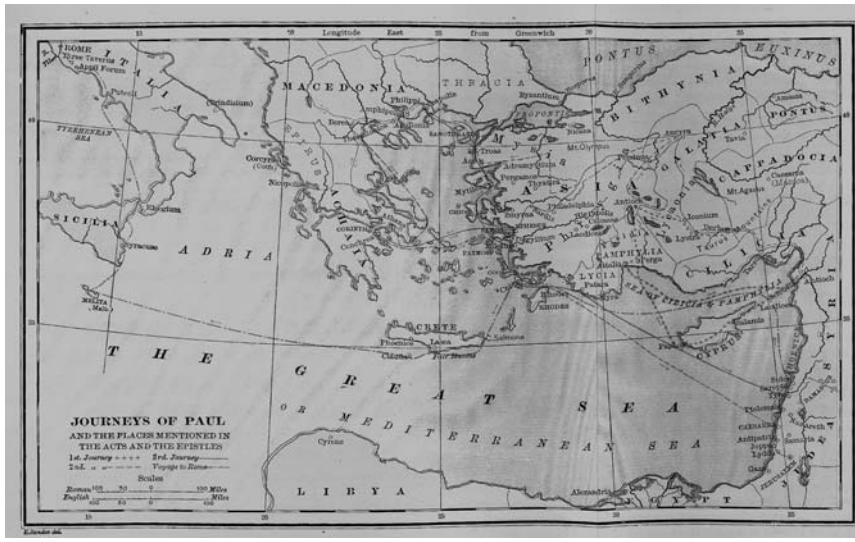
Although this passage seems ready to discount the powerful internal pressures that fueled the forward thrust of the Christian mission, and does so by the hypothesis of an insuperable external barrier, it nevertheless highlights the remarkable conjunction of external forces that provided a head of steam for the Christian mission. It is now time to turn to the single most important individual in spearheading the Gentile mission in Rome and elsewhere, and, in so doing, to reexamine an aspect of the internal reasons for expansion.

THE PAULINE FACTOR IN CROSS-CULTURAL MISSION

The martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:54–60) proved a turning point for the mission to the Gentiles. Although the apostle Peter and other leading figures of the Jerusalem church had not declared themselves as a body on the side of Stephen, there were enough sympathizers of the martyr to take the cause forward. It was this group who eventually arrived in Antioch after fleeing the persecution in Jerusalem, and began in earnest a mission to the Gentiles. There was a split in the ranks of the party of Stephen. There were those who continued to make the Jews the primary target of their preaching, and they studiously avoided straying into non-Jewish territory. They would have originated from Jerusalem. There was a second party who, after leaving Jerusalem, sought out Gentiles, and Greeks in particular, in Antioch and elsewhere and cultivated a committed following among them. Although these missionaries had been present in Jerusalem, they were natives of Cyprus and Cyrenia. Their initiative in Antioch set in motion a current of strong response, which, from the subsequent decisive intervention of Paul and Barnabas, swept forward to flood the Mediterranean world. The relevant passage from the Acts of the Apostles reads as follows:

> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ear of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad; and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. . . . So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church, and taught a large company of people. (Acts 11:19ff)

In a later passage in the same source, Barnabas and Saul (Paul) were commissioned as emissaries to the Gentile world (Acts 13:1–3), although in their own minds the Jewish connection in this effort remained paramount (Acts 13:5). This phase of the development of the missionary movement was important in identifying not only God-fearing people (Acts 10:23) but also uncircumcised Greeks as



Church and empire in the East under Constantine ca. A.D. 330.

worthy targets of Christian preaching. That left a permanent mark on the religion, as the terms "Christ" and "Christian" prove. Jesus was more than a messiah, and his followers more than Nazarenes. What's in a name was no small matter.

As a result of the exploits of Paul and Barnabas, churches sprang into existence in Syria and elsewhere where the people, unlike the Jews, had little experience of faithfulness to the law. Yet, even without that background, the new Greek and Syrian converts felt in every sense of the word to be the people of God and anxious to remain in fellowship with the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:29f.; 12:25). Their confidence in this matter was founded on the reality of the Gentile breakthrough, and it helped to reinforce the pluralist impetus of the gospel. The pattern of the creation of these Gentile churches falls outside the present scope, as does the issue of the personalities and experiences of the chief architects. But the preeminent role of Paul in this process should be assessed, not only with regard to the revolutionary impact of the Gentile mission, but also in respect of the new cross-cultural perspective of that breakthrough.

PAUL AND THE PLURALIST FERMENT

The rise of the Gentile church created profound theological repercussions, which it fell to Paul to try to enunciate and systematize. He did so in relation to what lay at hand, namely, his own Jewish religious heritage. He was in radical tension with his own cultural roots, not because those roots were unsound but because the Gentile breakthrough cast a shadow over any claims of cultural favoritism, Jewish or other. The anti-Semitic connotations that we have read into

Paul are ideas thrust upon him in disregard of the apostle's intention. The wave of guilt that swamped Christians of the post-Nazi generation engulfed Paul and his circle of disciples in spite of their impeccable Jewish credentials. It is a jarring piece of historical anachronism.

What is the case is that through the eyes of the Gentile church Paul encountered an unsettling reality about the seriousness of God's irrevocable desire to draw all people to the divine. The death and resurrection of Jesus had inaugurated the new age in which Paul, like Peter, discovered on the Gentile frontier that "God is no respecter of persons but that in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34–35). Just as that recognition breached the walls of separation between Jew and Gentile, so Paul's experience shattered his confidence in the notion of cultural exclusiveness embodied in a rigid Judaic creed. The following is how Harnack sketches the broad intellectual outlines of Paul's Gentile experience:

> The new religious level was the level of the Spirit and regeneration, of grace and faith, of peace and liberty; below and behind it lay *everything old,* including all the earlier revelations of God, since these were religions pertaining to the state of sin. This it was which enabled Paul, Jew and Pharisee as he was, to venture upon the great conception with which he laid the basis of any sound philosophy of religion and of the whole science of comparative religion, viz., the collocation of the "natural" knowledge of God possessed by man (i.e., all that had developed in man under the sway of conscience) with the law of the chosen people (Rom. 1:18–20). Both, Paul held, were revelations of God, though in different ways and of different values; both represented what had been hitherto the supreme possession of mankind. Yet both had proved inadequate; they had aggravated sin, and had ended in death. Now *a new religion was in force.* This meant that the Gentile mission was not a possibility but a duty, whilst freedom from the law was not a concession but the distinctive and blissful form which the gospel assumed for men. (Harnack 1908, 1:55)

Paul's ambivalent relationship to Judaism cannot be isolated from his leadership in the Gentile mission, and for good reason. As missionaries of the modern era found, encountering evidence of God's reality outside the familiar terms of one's culture overthrows reliance on that culture as universal and exclusive. A fresh criterion of discernment is introduced by which the truth of the gospel is unscrambled from one cultural yoke in order to take firm hold in another culture. Contrary to much of the conventional wisdom in this field of study, mission implies less a judgment on the cultural heritage of the convert (although in time the gospel will do the winnowing) than on that of the missionary. Many of the great missionary pioneers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were committed advocates of the cross-cultural acclimatization of Christianity, and that required them to concede the primacy of indigenous influence and materials. Growing up

in a society where Christianity was the religion of preference, many missionaries saw themselves as nothing but cultural patriots at home. Now, however, as they reduced the Bible into the languages of societies beyond the West they became champions of non-Western cultures. Examples abound in our own age of missionaries who by dint of sheer application acquired the necessary skill for penetrating and propounding the veins of truth and beauty to be found in other cultures. Though we may impugn their motives, these missionaries laid the foundations of indigenous renewal, and that was the foundation of the post-Western awakening of the twentieth century.

The anti-Western strictures of modern missionaries are revealingly similar to Paul's critical stance toward his background, for in both cases the culture of the message bearer acquired a peripheral status once the step was taken to engage another culture religiously. It would, therefore, be a grave misunderstanding of Paul's words to construe them as a rejection of Judaism, for that would present Christianity as an isolated beam of light that illuminates nothing that went before it or that came after it. It would never have occurred to Paul that his Jewish ancestors might be considered to have no merit in Christ's atonement. They did not know Jesus, yet they had a place in the ample shadow of the cross. So did the Gentiles — indeed, Jesus the Jew became the Christ of the Gentiles, thanks to the God of Israel. Accordingly, Paul's acute soul-searching with regard to the openness of his religious tradition results in his recognition that the light of God's truth has been shed on the Gentiles who have been accorded an honored place in God's salvific plan. Such a prospect filled Paul with awe — and with genuine remorse that he had ever excluded such a possibility by an idolatrous view of culture as divine entitlement. God's redemptive power had broken through to the Gentile world, thus radically shifting the stage of God's continuous dealings with the nations. The center of Christianity, Paul perceived, was in the heart and life of the believer without the presumption of cultural advantage. In this view, the temple was not the exclusive building centered in Jerusalem but the believers themselves whose body is the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). This insight is eloquently expressed in the epistle to the church at Ephesus. "Therefore remember," it counseled the new believers,

> that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands — remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:11–12, 19–22)

The idea of Gentiles coming into the full scope of salvation was understood for the revolutionary breakthrough it was. C. H. Dodd, the eminent New Testament scholar, wrote of Paul in this connection:

> He had not suspected that God was like that. His theological studies had told him that God was loving and merciful; but he had thought this love and mercy were expressed once and for all in the arrangements He had made for Israel's blessedness — "the plan of salvation." It was a new thing to be assured by an inward experience admitting of no further question that God loved him, and that the eternal mercy was a Father's free forgiveness of His erring child. (Dodd 1964, 80)

Yet that assurance calls up a troubling fact, for trust in the forms in which the law was devoutly enshrined must now be so massively drained of the element of exclusivity as to create a defining breach. Through that breach Paul confronted the undeniable fact of God's gracious dealings with the Gentiles. The pagans, too, had a place in "the plan of salvation."

> For himself, no doubt, whether as Jew or as Christian, the so-called Law of Moses was absolute law. Within the sphere of law there was nothing higher or more perfect. Yet the identical principle appeared also among the pagans. The pagan sense of right and wrong was God's law written on the heart — the same law as that delivered on Sinai, Paul would have said. . . . He had sympathy enough to perceive that the Stoic too must fall upon this problem. There are passages in Stoic writers tinged with a melancholy which recalls the moving transcript from Paul's experience. . . . It is at bottom a human problem, and not a specifically Jewish one, that he is facing, but his own bitter experience in Pharisaic Judaism lent a cutting edge to his analysis. (Dodd 1964, 73–74)

Any modern-day missionary worth the name can testify to this insight and concur with the observation that it comes initially as an unsettling experience. Those who, like Paul, felt the raw sharpness of the break with the past were constrained to interpret it as having occurred by the action of a God whose power exceeded one cultural expression of it. Hence Paul talks of the unfathomable mystery of God (Rom. 11:33–36), the unsearchable wisdom and the inexhaustible goodness of One whom he once presumed to know only by inherited cultural measures. As Dodd rightly observed, "Behind all the scholastic arguments of the Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians lies the crucial question whether religion is a matter of national inheritance and external tradition, or a matter of ever-fresh personal response to the gracious dealing of God" (Dodd 1964, 39–40).

Yet no one is beyond this error of assuming a built-in moral advantage for one's culture, especially when culture is underpinned by economic and political power. Without centuries of instruction in the habit, even the Gentiles were not above this piece of cultural pretentiousness (Rom. 11:18, 19, 25). For most people it is difficult enough to respect those with whom they disagree, to say nothing

of those who might be different from them in culture, language, and tradition. With respect to cultural chauvinism, pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but in respect of God pluralism is the cornerstone of the universal human family.

Reflecting on the historical consequences of this question, Gibbon draws attention to the enormous diversity and pluralism of primitive Christianity, which a later age abandoned. He declares:

> The government of the church has often been the subject, as well as the prize, of religious contention. The hostile disputants of Rome, of Paris, of Oxford, and of Geneva, have alike struggled to reduce the primitive and apostolic model to the respective standards of their own policy. [By contrast,] the apostles declined the office of legislation, and rather chose to endure some partial scandals and divisions, than to exclude the Christians of a later age from the liberty of varying their forms of ecclesiastical government according to the changes of times and circumstances. The scheme of policy which, under their approbation, was adopted for use of the first century, may be discovered from the practice of Jerusalem, of Ephesus, or of Corinth. The societies which were instituted in the cities of the Roman empire were united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution. The want of discipline and human learning was supplied by the occasional assistance of the prophets, who were called to that function without distinction of age, of sex, or of natural abilities, and who, as often as they felt the divine impulse, poured forth the effusions of the Spirit in the assembly of the faithful. (Gibbon n.d., 1:418)

This is not to say that cultural anarchy has a place in the divine scheme. Each cultural embodiment of God's redemptive purpose should be viewed as authentic in respect of its relative role in conveying the message, and inadequate only insofar as it falls lamentably short of the Lord's utter brokenness. It should not be viewed in terms of how it fits neatly into the jigsaw of an earthly hegemony. Paul's profound unease with a certain narrow interpretation of Israel's covenant with God stems from justified mistrust of human achievement as a substitute for the truth, and that unease is not moderated when directed to his Gentile listeners. He, accordingly, warns them about the grave moral consequences of cultural arrogance, a warning that was painfully reminiscent of his own experience. "Note then the kindness and the severity of God," he writes to the Gentile church, "severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off" (Rom. 11:22). And cut off precisely at the point where they might become most confident and conceited about their cultural achievement. We fall only when we are up. Pride lays low.

Then as now, the challenge for the Gentile church was to be centered in the "kindness of God," not in the self-esteem that Gentiles were the moral arbiter of everyone's destiny. There is, necessarily, a normative lesson to be learned in all

this, but that has to do with the higher logic of the divine provision that allows believers to be chosen as God's instruments without that in any way exempting them and setting aside their accountability. That remorseless consistency drives a sword through the heart of cultural complacency, and by its thrust souls are healed.

The experience of the Gentile church brought Paul to the radical edge of his own tradition. His religious sentiments were progressively adjusted by the exposure to the Gentile movement; mission does not spare its own founders. Dodd wrote, "Paul the Jew had to suffer the shattering of his deepest beliefs before he came through to a new conception of a missionary's work. He had to learn that there was no distinction of Jew and Gentile. It needs some effort of imagination to realize what this surrender cost him" (Dodd 1964, 47). Paul understood that the conscience of the "heathen" performed a kerygmatic function not too dissimilar from the tablets of revelation, a line of reasoning he was prepared to develop because he followed it through Israel to the frontiers of Roman civilization and Greek culture.

ETHNIC AND LINGUISTIC FACTORS IN MISSION

Ethnicity raises an acute paradox: how may the church, Gentile or other, rise to its missionary obligation unless it believes that its culturally specific experience is in some fashion normative of the divine truth? Mission is essentially praxis, and that entails not only upholding the truth but also relationship and communication. Whatever the question about the essence of the message, the specific and the concrete foundations of mission are set in cultural particularity and historical specificity. Christianity is a religion of historical events that are decisive in the meaning people ascribe to them. That process of attaching meaning to events contains the seeds of personal as well as cross-cultural engagement, and it defines the task of mission. It was not only that these events occurred that interested the apostles but the fact that individuals wrestled with the meaning of the events. History is not merely a circular chronicle of things that happened when, where, and by whom; there is an overarching logic of purpose that is intrinsic to the surface parade of events. Human events do not just go nowhere.

For the early Christians there were two basic ways to proceed. One was to make the missionary culture — in their case, the Mosaic code — the carrier and arbiter of the message. This we might call mission by *diffusion.* By it religion expands by means of its founding cultural warrants and is implanted in other societies primarily as a matter of cultural adoption. Islam, with which Christianity shares a strong missionary tradition, exemplifies this mode of mission, which carries the assumption that the proclamation of the message must be accompanied by adherence to the sacred Arabic of Scripture in law and devotion.

The other way was to institute the recipient culture as a valid and necessary locus of the proclamation, allowing the religion to arrive without the requirement of deference to the originating culture. This we might call mission by *translation,*

and it carries with it the need for indigenous theological inquiry, which arises as a necessary stage in the process of reception and adaptation. Conversion in mission as diffusion is not primarily a matter of indigenous theological inquiry. It is, rather, assimilation into the founding cultural forms of the message. On the other hand, conversion in mission as translation rests on the persuasive nature of the idioms adopted in religious practice. What is distinctive about this persuasive process is that it assumes a relative, secondary status for the culture of the message bearer. From Peter and Paul down to our own day, Christian missionaries have spent a good deal of their time denouncing false conversion, and urging believers to adopt a code of critical self-examination lest they presume on the worth of human claims, whether as missionary or convert. It is consistent with this persuasive rule that in the modern missionary movement no legal penalties applied to those who rejected the call to conversion or who reneged. It was very different in Western Christendom.

We are not here pretending that these two ways of doing mission are separate or easy to disentangle. For example, in the Jerusalem church it is clear that most of the apostles thought primarily in terms of Jewish cultural diffusion, and in any case it would be hard to separate the genuine from the false in every case of conversion even in those heady days. Similarly, it is clear that important Muslim missionary agents insisted on sincere intention as a desideratum of true religion. As one classical Muslim scholar put it, "Assuredly the worth of an act is by its intention" (*innama amal bi-n-níyah*). Furthermore, any religion may be seduced by cultural idolatry and spread by diffusion from the top. Nevertheless, in the two religions the preponderant balance of emphasis fell to one side or the other. Mission as diffusion is unquestionably the distinguishing strand in Islam, whereas mission as translation is the vintage mark of Christianity. The Gentile basis of faith adoption without cultural shibboleths because it is the sovereign gift of God defined Christianity's religious outlook, set aside only at cost to convert and church alike.

We may draw the following conclusion on the comparative approach to mission. In Paul's mind mission was the solvent of cultural chauvinism, essentially his own. He was prepared — indeed compelled — to subject the Gentile church to a related scrutiny, namely, that the same penultimate destiny awaits their cultural expression of the gospel. To help instill this lesson, Paul affirmed and held before the Gentiles trust in Christ's millennial reign. Christianity is first and foremost a religion of the transcendent divine will mediated by the channel of cultural variety and multifaceted appropriation. The gospel demands frontier crossing for its wider transmission, and it is contradictory to its spirit to invoke cultural hegemony as the prerequisite of conveying God's truth. Cultural hegemony violates the gospel by giving primacy to conveyance over the message. As the apostles affirmed, that message is irrevocable in its insistence that there is no respect of persons with God (Acts 10:34–35; Rom. 2:11), and that no culture in itself is unclean (Rom. 14:14).

The positive side of this claim is equally valid: while no person is indispensable, all are equally esteemed in God's sight (1 Pet. 2:4), as indeed all things are pure (Rom. 14:20). In the same fashion, no one is the exclusive or normative standard for anyone else, and no one culture is God's exclusive favorite. It results in a pluralism of radical scope, one that institutional Christianity has found difficult to accept or to honor. Yet if translatability is the taproot of Christian expansion, resistance to it by institutional religion is like the rebellion of the branches against the tree.

Cross-cultural boundaries are accorded an intrinsic status in the proclamation of the gospel, and Christians who stood at such frontiers acquired a critical comparative perspective on their own cultural forms. They were challenged — as Paul was — to shed the blinkers of their cultural prejudice in order to face with unencumbered eyes the magnitude of God's salvific grace in other cultural settings. Cultural systems that turn in on themselves harden into xenophobia, with little relevance for the rights of neighbors. Trailing multiple idioms, mission helps to break the old wineskins with the pressure of cross-cultural experience, dissolving the barriers of cultural exclusion and suspicion. The student of history should appreciate what a major assault on cultural prejudice it was to get Jew and Gentile to share common fellowship. It was nothing short of a revolution in caste dogmatism, and it confirms that culture does not have the last word on God's generosity.

As translation, mission begot faith and obedience to God, whose humility and humanity were conveyed in multiple cultural systems without those systems hardening into exclusive pillars of truth. This might suggest an arid, Spartan view of culture, but in fact it ennobled culture by introducing the safeguard of nondeification. God is not an interchangeable cultural concept, a pious projection of cultural conceit: God is in art, music, architecture, nature, and creation, for example, but these things are not God per se. God is not an abstract notion bounded by cultural restrictions. To the Jew, God must speak as a Jew, with a repetition of that particularity in respect to the Gentiles. The result is a profound stimulation of the inner life of the pre-Christian hinterland, for the beam of truth first cast upon Abraham's children as Jews has covered the Gentiles, too, even though they had only a frail grasp of the promise.

The expansion of primitive Christianity in its Judaic and classical phases led to renewed interest in the pre-Christian materials of the age, and it is doubtful whether many of what would now be regarded as vital philosophical ideas and cultural forms would have seen the light of day without the work of retrieval and renewal Christianity achieved. Harnack is emphatic on the point when he writes: "Christianity possessed in a more unsullied form the contents of what is meant by 'the Greek philosophy of religion' " (Harnack 1908, 1:315). The present-day analogy would be the immense currents of cultural revitalization going on in the Third World, where the overlap with the Christian impact has opened fresh corridors of faith and understanding. It is astonishing how many communities that were previously consigned to the dustheap of society received a new lease

on life from their encounter with the gospel. While cultural observers properly acknowledge such achievement, they should particularly look to the God who made it all possible. Anthropology teems with divine intimations.

Understood as the "New Israel," the Gentile church is relevant to an understanding of the rhythms of Christian mission in general. The righteous servants of the Hebrew dispensation have their counterparts in "the saints" of the "New Israel." The Gentile era was the fruit of the chosen olive branch of ancient Israel. Chosen to be the people of God for their age and time, Christian Gentiles also entered into a covenant of adoption and witness before the world, pressing and being pressed to cross new frontiers and to reject the racial stigma of the unclean. On that front the experience of the Gentiles prepared them particularly well for the church's mission of reconciliation and openness. This point was appreciated by the renewed efforts of translation, interpretation, and other efforts of Christian apologetics. The preponderance of Greek-speaking Christians in the primitive church forced the apostles to embark on translation, interpretation, and exegesis. No tongue was taboo or exclusive, and none was irredeemable. The question was, even with apostolic example, whether the Gentiles, too, would falter and bargain away grace for law. The thought unsettled Paul.

Translation is a complex enterprise. By it, the originating language is regarded as inadequate, inappropriate, as a hindrance, or at any rate as ineffective for the task at hand. Thus, a revisionist role is assigned to the original mode. In addition, translation forces a distinction between the truth of the message and its accompanying mode of cultural conveyance, with the presupposition that a separation of message and medium must challenge believers to uphold the primacy of the message against its cultural packaging.

Translation involves a degree of cultural decentralization — or, at least, cultural retrenchment — on the part of the translator, though the receiving culture may eventually compensate the translator with the consolation of adoption. This resolves the question of final accountability, for the translator must henceforth shift the ground of comprehension to the target language. It was as such that, without any claim to being the native or working language of Jesus and the close circle of apostles, ancient Greek became the preponderant medium of fundamental religious proclamation and critical reflection. The originating Aramaic and Hebraic languages, which formed the basis of Jesus' preaching and teaching, were reduced to the position of a minor undercarriage, making halting intrusion in the generally smooth progress of the new discourse. (Much later, the issue of linguistic accountability rose with some urgency in the nineteenth-century revival of Slavic mission. In that case the British and Foreign Bible Society decided to make use of the best south Slavonic linguists available, thinking it "more important to be expert in the recipient language and culture than in the original languages" [Bundy 1985, 393]. We discuss mission to the Slavs in chapter 2.)

As translation, mission commits to the bold, radical step that the receiving culture is the decisive destination of God's salvific promise and as such has an honored place under "the kindness of God," with the attendant safeguard against

cultural idolatry. By drawing a distinction between the message and its cultural carriage, mission as translation affirms the *missio Dei* as the hidden light of its work. It is the *missio Dei* that allowed translation to enlarge the boundaries of the new Christian audience. The kerygmatic preaching of the apostles, and certainly of Jesus, at first took the Hebrew Scriptures as the limit of salvific promise, though the fulfillment of that promise breached that limit. By understanding afresh the scope of that promise, the apostles felt confident about pursuing God's promises deep in the heartland of Greek culture, Roman power, and the ferment of provincial life.

Ultimately this gives the gospel a multifaceted pluralist character while preventing the imposition of a uniform, monolithic template. Access to Jesus as Savior, Redeemer, and Judge was through the specificity of cultural self-understanding, and that cultural specificity is the ground of divine self-disclosure, with Jesus as the divine outpouring on the human scale. Through the locus of cultural identity the Savior and Redeemer burst into history recognizably as one of us, though that also brought the light of discernment into human affairs. The fullness of life that the Savior brought placed in a redeeming light cultural projects of superiority, making them an impediment to the divine plan for human flourishing.

Mission has been a catalyst for change. The specific cultural medium of access to God becomes the stage for serious and sustained self-examination. The merciful "kindness of God" stands in stark contrast to the wickedness of human pride. The springs of Christian renewal reside in the painful gap between God's beneficent purpose and human willfulness. Awareness of this gap can bring about a U-turn and lead to openness to God and to the neighbor. Faith assurance is the reward of being aligned to God's will, and the bedrock of personal renewal and collective responsibility.

Although inclusion in the fellowship is through cultural self-understanding, the fellowship is also a critical threshold of self-examination. Believers must recognize the difference between cultural representation and revealed truth. God is close and specific enough to be recognizably real to persons as persons, and yet is not so framed by culture as to become an object of cultural captivity. God is understood as righteously against us because God is rightly for us. In that light mission was the barrier against cultural immobility, for it challenged the idea of culture as the arbiter of the truth of God. Where it was successful, mission was the vehicle for commencing a defining meeting between the concrete human situation and its burdens and fears, for the one part, and God's breakthrough in the incarnate life and ministry of Jesus, for the other. Only concrete experience equips us to grasp how the gospel is an authoritative prescription for the historical human condition.

Mission's critical function is extended through explicit missionary criticism — a criticism, we must understand, that takes place always in the context of the translated Scriptures. When we have rightly and properly distinguished between the desire to do mission in other cultures and the object of cultural imperialism, we are still left with a substantial body of material in the Gospels that

justifies adopting an unavoidable critical stance toward culture by subjecting cultural claims to the scrutiny of the gospel, especially the oppressive elements in culture. This has been true of Christianity in periods of struggle and minority existence as well as in times of favor and political respectability. There is, as eloquently stated by H. Richard Niebuhr, an inherent tension between Christ and culture. Paul tells a section of his Christian audience that through Christ they are more than conquerors (Rom. 8:37). Yet, almost in the same breath, he catalogues the occasions of ceaseless contention that he experienced in his relations with worldly authorities (1 Cor. 4:9–13; 2 Cor. 4:7–12). Christians are in the world, but not of it (1 Cor. 7:29–31). However well mediated and embodied in earthly structures, the claims of God must transcend worldly calculations, for obedience to God conflicts with other rival sovereignties that infest culture. The apostles felt under obligation to signal loyalty to God as fundamentally nonnegotiable, although in practice they could not — and would not — coerce or bribe people into compliance. The heart knows better.

It is this unwillingness to merge Christ and culture that stiffened the apostolic resolve, and Paul took up the challenge as an inescapable personal burden in order to drive the vital point home. In one place he admonished the Gentile church about being mindful lest they share the fate of those who excluded themselves from the hope of the gospel. There is a touching protectiveness about such concerns, in Paul as in modern missionaries. It is a justified warning, and the missionary would feel its force long before new converts entertained its possibility. It is the insight of cross-cultural mission that those who embrace the new religion are particularly vulnerable to idealistic separatism, and however missionaries may be mistrusted as spiritual overlords, they serve a living intercultural lesson here. Although it is their choice to frame the caution in a language that causes no offense, missionaries have little choice about the deep disparity between Christ and culture. Idolatry is an offense to the gospel, and a cultural tradition masquerading as exclusionary prerogative can expect nothing but implacable opposition from the church. No amount of effortless acculturation or sophisticated contextualization can absolve the church from this fundamental obligation, and this gauntlet the apostles picked up eagerly.

In addressing this issue the apostle Paul calls on his Jewish heritage. His impatience with the Christians of his Galatian epistle stems from his firsthand knowledge of the fate of those who misused their freedom in Christ to place themselves under cultural restrictions. Keen to expose the inconsistencies of the Greek converts of Galatia, Paul does so in the context of painful disagreements in the church about whether the Gentile barrier ought to have been breached. So he recounts with public regret his major differences with the Jerusalem church and the open rift with Peter and Barnabas at Antioch, a strong Gentile center (Gal. 2:1–15). In the dispute with Peter, Paul adduced for his defense arguments from their common Jewish background, raising a principle that he wished to apply to the Gentile issue. The standard by which Gentiles are judged, he contends, does not differ in kind or in scale from that applied to the natural descendants

of Abraham (Gal. 3:6–9). In the end, even the Christ-based principle of faith by redemption is understandable only by reference to the Abrahamic ideal, thus giving the Jewish heritage an extended application beyond the covenant. Jewish religious law is thus not repudiated as such; what Paul resisted was an interpretation that exaggerated its exclusive intention in complete disregard of the anticipated Christ-event.

Certain sections of the Pharisaic party, for example, upheld the view that the law was the preexistent plan according to which the world was made, and that God was preoccupied with studying it. This led to a feeling of superiority and the belief that other nations existed on Israel's behalf. (Fourth Ezra 6:55–56, dated to A.D. 100, speaks of other nations as spittle. In an earlier passage [3:36], an allowance is made for individuals who may have kept the divine precepts, although that is distinguished from God calling other nations.) Paul was no stranger to such claims of superiority, but he found them blinding in discerning God's mind and purpose. Some reacted to this by repudiating all forms of national identity, or at least conceiving a fundamental contradiction between culture and faith. Yet that was not the apostle's way. Instead Paul propounds cultural pluralism without reducing Christ to a cultural ideology: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:28–29). The unity of faith is commensurate with the variety of culture. Christian history has been nothing else if it is not that double heritage of faith and its diverse cultural manifestations.

It was Paul's achievement that while he saved the gospel from cultural determinism, he retained the particularity of culture as necessary for launching Christianity in the world. For instance, he faced the combined demands of Jewish particularity in seeking messianic consolation and the Greek expectation of philosophical enlightenment by affirming the cross as the promise and the gift. He writes to the church at Corinth: "For the Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:22–24). The gospel is recognized by both "Jew" and "Greek" as an affirmation of their respective concrete identities. In Paul's mind, improbable as that seemed, Christ came into the world not to make a composite montage of cultural differences but to bring their teeming greatness into God's plan of salvation. As believers share in the divine fellowship they rise to the fullness of life whose source is God. The community of Christians is more than the lifeless graveyard of identical bodies; it is the richness of individual talents seeded with the constant, steady outpouring of divine love. The following summary of his achievement underlines Paul's contribution to mission as a dynamic, cross-cultural movement out of which churches grew as monuments of God's grace.

> Recognizing the supreme fruits of the Spirit in faith, love, hope, and all the allied virtues, bringing out the outbursts of enthusiasm into the service

> of edification, subordinating the individual to the larger organism, claiming the natural conditions of social life, for all its defects and worldliness, as divine arrangements, he overcame the dangers of fanaticism and created churches which would live in the world without being of the world. But organization never became for Paul an end in itself or a means to worldly aggrandizement. "The aims of his ecclesiastical labours were unity in brotherly love and the reign of God in the heart of man, not the rule of savants or priests over laity." (Harnack 1908, 1:78)

DICHOTOMY OF CHURCH AND MISSION

Running on concurrent lines, two impulses developed as a result of the impact of the preaching and ministry of Jesus and by virtue of apostolic leadership. One was the obligation to spread the message with every available facility and opportunity, and the other was the need to regulate the emerging community of believers who lived their religious life first in the shadows of the synagogue and subsequently in spontaneous cells of devotion scattered along the trails of the Diaspora. In the first ardor of faith, believers committed their resources to witnessing and spreading the message, willing to surmount impediments in their way. The notion, to be modified later, of what Bultmann calls the imminent coming of Jesus as Messiah (as opposed to Jesus' return as such) (1951–55, 1:33) created a vigilant spirit among the first Christians, and they became identified as the eschatological congregation. (It is fair to add that many scholars disagree with Bultmann on this point. These scholars argue that for the first disciples, "the Jesus who was to come was the Jesus who had come [Acts 1:11]" [Blunt 1929, 18]). A spirit of otherworldliness gripped their imagination, and a matching ascetic ethic framed their earthly conduct. However, the instinct for "self-diffusion" as Harnack defines it was stimulated by faith in the anticipated end of the age and succeeded in producing a burgeoning movement spread over many areas, and bound together by ties of mutual succor and a common devotion to Jesus as Lord. The demand grew for a rule of faith and practice in the light of the diversity of church practices, much of it in response to specific needs and experiences. A broad consensus emerged on the standard by which apostolic authority would be recognized, and this helped hold together the plural congregations thrown up by successful missionary activity.

These two impulses of the obligation of mission and of the need to regulate, though distinct, often fused into a single motivation of seeking to use the rule of discipline and support in order to maintain the missionary momentum. Whatever their worldly circumstance, the first Christians considered themselves on trial for their faith and interpreted their travails as signs of the approaching end. As Tertullian expressed it in his characteristically defiant style, Christians saw their persecution as the energizer of mission and the seal of their heavenly hope: "The oftener we are mowed down by you, the larger grow our numbers. The

blood of Christians is a seed. . . . That very obstinacy which you reprobate is our instructress" (cited in Harnack 1908, 1:366).

In time, however, instruction took less dramatic form, and a routine, everyday pattern settled on religious experience and practice, at which point the impulse of mission, for so long the predominant urge of faith and practice, resolved itself into a demand for organization and regularity. The challenge was to develop the instruments of unity in the faith without inhibiting local freedom. So the children of the Spirit would be bound together with the heirs to the *Pax Romana.*

The impulse of mission did not flag, but instead took an inward turn as Christianity settled to digest the copious extraneous materials it imbibed from Hellenic, Roman, and Oriental sources. Indeed, this "syncretic" process conferred a concrete universal character on the religion even though, thanks to its Jewish monotheist roots, it retained a profound antipathy toward "syncretistic" compromise at the core of the message. The cultural compromise allowed the church to be the center and focus of the message, with the subjugation of mission as a subsidiary branch of the church. This shift had radical implications for Christian ethics, for warrants and injunctions that once hinged on eschatological fear now shifted to matters of administrative implementation. The church was the repository of apostolic and missionary teaching, and catechetical schools were founded to inculcate its teaching.

Tertullian's virtue of obstinacy acquired a highly institutional though supple meaning. Tertullian gave hints that Christianity is invested in lawful authority in the sense that Christians had a vested interest in the stability of the empire. He declared, "We know that mighty shock impending over the whole earth — in fact, the very end of all things threatening dreadful woes — is only retarded by the continued existence of the Roman empire. We have no desire, then, to be overtaken by these dire events; and in praying that their coming may be delayed, we are lending our aid to Rome's duration."[5] Even though their hopes were pinned on the "City of God," as Augustine puts it, Christians did not forsake the world, for they remembered that "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" (John 3:16).

In this situation the idea of mission was revived to secure the service of culture for the work of God, and much of the evidence suggests that this achievement did not conflict with the missionary expansion of the church. On one level, this situation was to be expected, for cultural confidence is a necessary accompaniment of the translation of the message. On another level, cultural transposition carries the risk of cultural captivity.

In normal circumstances it is easy for the momentum of successful transplanting to spawn contradictory impulses by making the interests of the institutional church an all-consuming preoccupation, with Christian leaders more concerned with the politics of consolidation and status than with sharing authority with new converts gained by missionary outreach. Even if Christian leaders were alert to

5. Tertullian, *Apologia,* chapter xxxii.

wider opportunities, they would be inhibited by the pressure to claim the specific cultural milieu of their setting as normative for faith and practice. This would not prevent the church from spreading, but the diffusionist path of political assimilation would guide its course. Since the gospel springs to life by translation, the slowing down of the missionary impulse involves a certain cooling down of the message, although in brief moments of prophetic wakefulness the reform impulse might nudge a lukewarm church forward. In the main, however, mission would exist as diffusion, and the Christian calling as the bid for social acceptance.

MISSION AND SYNCRETISM

The Jewish factor in the expansion of Christianity was important for safeguarding the monotheist core of the gospel. Christianity carried with it an irreconcilable attitude to polytheism, and owed this temper to its Judaic heritage. There is only one God, or one source of truth, and other deities cannot be rival divinities without breaching this sacred law. However it is approached, polytheism in the Judeo-Christian view is an unacceptable intrusion on the divine power, and when it weakens faith and trust in that power it deserves implacable resistance. Both Judaism and Christianity share this outlook with Islam. There is a stark, unremitting insistence on the monotheist faith as the duty and demand of the religious life, the test that ultimately judges all other forms of deference. Christian preaching adhered to this teaching, and, still keeping close to its Judaic roots, held up the Christ-event as the definitive manifestation of the living God. It required and demanded a radical adjustment of the picture of God.

In the end, however, Christianity parted ways with both its Judaic heritage and the Islamic application of it. For one thing, Judaism remained predominantly the religion of the people called Jews for whom conversion was both a religious step and incorporation into a racial community. For another, although Islam made submission to one God the towering call of its mission, it placed this alongside the revelation of the Arabic Qur'an, so that when the "sword of truth" was unsheathed against polytheists and unbelievers, its double blade gleamed with the point of God's oneness and the infallibility of the Arabic revelation. It was always difficult to judge which blade cut deeper, the conviction of the one God or the power of the Arabic Scripture. Once a conjunction was made between religion and its Arabic embodiment, however, the Islamic mission acquired a double advantage. Esteem for the Arabic became the ally of faith in the one God of orthodox practice. To be an Arab, pure and proud, was to be a Muslim, sound and staunch. In the Arab heartland and beyond, "Arabization" came to stand for "Islamization," and cultural identity for religious status. (One expression of the religious primacy of Arabic is that to be Arab and Jewish or Christian, for example, sounds much like a misnomer in spite of evidence to the contrary.) That was the strength of Islam. As described in a rather sketchy way in chapter 8 below, the contrast with Christianity could not be greater.

Like Judaism and Islam, Christianity was committed to monotheism, but, unlike both of them, it makes translation the original medium of its Scripture. And translation opened Christianity to secular influences as well as to the risk of polytheism — Christians adopted as their own the names of God of other people. The degree to which Christianity became integrated into a particular culture was important for assessing the success of Christian preaching. It was also important for determining the issue of religious compromise. Once an entire culture opened itself to the Christian presence it was possible for the missionary to influence and mold that culture without fear of total rejection, though that did not resolve the problem of syncretism.

While ascetic renunciation was not a viable option, assimilation saddled Christianity with the problem of cultural compromise. Yet this risk appears to be no greater than that taken in the Judaic or Islamic example. On the contrary, if, as early Christians believed, God is the universal source of life and truth, they were right to seek and see evidence of God's prevenient activity in the cultures preceding them. This way of seeing things implies that no culture was fundamentally alien to the source of life and truth, and therefore mission was an assurance of continuity with that insight. Yet mission also represented the challenge and promise of a new beginning in faith and obedience, with consequences for culture. The apostolic proclamation sought a serious ethical and religious commitment, and it did this on a double front. First, it announced the completion and fulfillment of tendencies introduced in earlier ages. Second, it signaled a fresh point of departure in the religious and ethical life. Mission encouraged cultural self-affirmation while requiring moral self-transformation at the same time. That was the stake and the risk, the "com-promise" and the promise.

Historians have made a great deal of the view that a certain level of cultural unity was essential to the success of primitive Christianity, taking the position that had the church encountered stiff external barriers its progress would have been seriously impeded. I have tried to modify this argument by calling attention to the internal reasons of Christian expansion without denying that historical factors played a role, while resisting the conclusion that historical circumstances also determined the content of Christian preaching. The gospel did rise above the circumstances of its propagation. A more serious issue, however, is whether the apostles proceeded the way they did because they did not encounter any major obstacles. Did Christianity spread because no one challenged it seriously? That seems most implausible. The external forces militating against Christians were powerful, including the cruel tortures of Roman authorities as well, justified fear among the believers. There was, in addition, the considerable barrier of religious and philosophical objections, which assailed the gospel from within. Christians needed to be wary of the facile tolerance that placed them on the same footing as the other numerous cults of the empire. They also had to be careful not to create too great a distance between themselves and society lest they lose the support of potential friends and allies. In the end they were misunderstood and misinterpreted, and had to endure cruel loyalty tests.

In the event, the Roman authorities, such as Pliny the Younger, were moved by the harshness of the treatment Christians received, and intervened with an appeal to due process and to the fundamental rights of the individual. On the official level, that gave Christians much-needed breathing space. At the unofficial level, however, there was no letup to the pressure from other religious groups and from the cosmopolitan citizenry with their hostile philosophical attitude. To meet that challenge, Christians entered into public discussion and personal encounter. In the ongoing struggle with their detractors, Christians emerged better furnished with materials and better placed to take advantage of new sources acquired by expansion. Still, in the initial stages much hesitation and even reluctance marked the community of believers as they stood poised on the frontier of the Greco-Roman world, conscious of the receding terrain of Palestine behind them and the threatening vistas of pagan compromise ahead.

At this critical juncture, the Jewish heritage proved invaluable, and it was the apostle Paul who called on it for ideas and rules that a later generation of Christians used as guideposts even though their own Gentile background was very different from that of Jewish Christians. One important idea, drawn from rabbinic sources, was that mission was a risk in which the advocate committed his or her resources without the assurance of just reward, though one might believe that a higher reward awaited in the kingdom to come (1 Cor. 9:20–22). It was like the sower of the parable scattering the seeds of the kingdom with the knowledge that some would be lost on inhospitable soil but that the chance of success elsewhere warranted taking such risks (Matt. 13:3–8). Keen to preserve the purity of the message, a timid evangelist might deem such risk-taking foolhardy in the extreme, though in that case the message would wither as cultural entitlement from the unwillingness to expose it to the elements. In the final analysis there was no reasonable alternative to risk-taking and, for authority, Christians could go back to their Lord and Master himself whom the cross did not spare or thwart.

MISSION, REFORM, AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Christians were familiar with three basic models of religious organization, if we may paraphrase ideas developed in another connection by Humphrey Fisher, a historian of Islam. These models are not necessarily separate phases that are distinct from each other in a clear, differentiated fashion; rather, they represent at any given time styles of religious organization. It may happen that one historical period may be more conducive to a particular style of religious organization than another, but it may also happen that all three styles operate concurrently in any one period, leading to a plurality of varying organizational styles.

The first style may be called quarantine, when, because of timidity, anxiety, expectancy, or eschatological warrants, believers separate themselves to maintain close vigilance over their life and conduct in relative seclusion from the world. Contact with outsiders is reduced to a minimum, and the disciples undertake prayer, the breaking of bread, exhortation, and mutual aid. In quarantine

the highest standards are maintained, new members admitted, and a common life developed in which resources and responsibilities become common ownership. There is an intensity of religious life such as is untypical and out of place outside the walls of quarantine. Believers partake of the unfiltered message without the mediating structures of interpretation and without obligation to tradition. In the controlled environment of quarantine, members adhere to a literal reading of the Scriptures, gripped by fear and by a fervent conviction that their community represented a virtuous break with an unrighteous world that was destined to be destroyed in the coming judgment (Acts 2:43–47; 1 Pet. 4:7–13; 1 Thess. 4:16–18). This style of marshalling religious experience occurs right across Christian history, from the fever of New Testament eschatology to modern forms of Christian utopianism. By its nature, quarantine is preparation for action rather than a tranquil respite from action. If quarantine turns permanent it becomes a sealed ghetto, a temporal enclave suspended in space. In this respect, although there were elements of quarantine in the primitive church, those elements were modified by the pilgrim impulse of the Christian movement.

The second type is syncretist in nature, and it shows the primitive church developing new official rubrics while embracing new materials and ideas at the same time. Abandoning the underground cells of withdrawal, believers spilled out into the wider world where they encountered and were affected by other beliefs and ideas. Believers were in transition ("for here we have no abiding city" [Heb. 13:14]), and were scattered across a cruel, unbelieving world where they sought their bearings in the gap between the known and the unknown, between the discredited old moorings and the uncertainty of an uncharted future.

As a consequence, Christian teaching took a new and decisive turn. For example, the practice of circumcision, anchored in the ancient code, was unhinged by the challenge of the new ferment; it was eventually dropped altogether as a condition of faith (Gal. 5:2–6, 11; 6:12–15), and retained only as a metaphor of the spiritual state (Rom. 2:29; Phil. 3:2–3). Another was sacrifice. In quarantine, Christians kept themselves clear of any contact with meat offered in sacrifice. However, the rule was drastically adjusted to allow individual freedom in deciding what was best in the circumstances, including the idea of the believer's body as itself a living sacrifice (1 Cor. 8; 10:23; Rom. 12:1; 14:15, 17). Marriage was another. The apostles, some of whom were married, nevertheless felt compelled to support norms of celibacy in a move that amounted to an open scorn of the permissive practices of the time.

The exigencies of life in the world, however, forced a revision in thinking, and so, with grudging feeling, the ground was finally surrendered (1 Cor. 7:1–2, 7–9 revives the theme of celibacy). Slowly but inexorably the walls of quarantine began to crack and believers found themselves standing shoulder to shoulder with people who did not share their faith but who shared the world with them. Observances that were maintained as rituals of separation and transition gradually changed into rites of initiation, identification, and confirmation. The idea of holiness as keeping oneself separate from the world yielded to that of conducting

oneself responsibly in the world (Rom. 12). With so many forces working to wear down quarantine, retreat from the world was in the final analysis rejected as escapist. If they had anything distinctive about their vocation, believers felt that the pressure to conform to the world should not be allowed to upstage the message.

This brings us to the third type of religious life, which is reform and prophetic witness, with renewal and empowerment of the fellowship its goal. In reform, Christians are in the world but not of it. It is a delicate line, which only the most gifted, and certainly only the minority, might hope not to cross. Most believers continued to occupy the broad overlap with the world, confronting bread-and-butter quotidian issues. They looked after their own short-term interests rather than holding out in any costly contest with the cultural establishment. From their ranks would emerge the compromisers — those whose supple conscience would give them license to stint on the truth. Reform would target them, insisting that the sins of those who ought to know better are more scandalous than the sins of unbelievers. Reformers had become increasingly impatient and aggrieved toward the status quo, and their familiarity with quarantine values stiffened their resolve, causing them to head a movement for radical change. Accordingly, the battle lines were redrawn: the line of spiritual purity cultivated in quarantine guided the resolve of reform to recast mainstream society in the image of the virtuous community by tossing out the chaff. Prophetic courage redrew the boundary with the world according to the prickly scale of moral commissars and their stalwarts.

Hence the proliferation of radical splinter groups for whom "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," as Tertullian put it uncompromisingly. Reform in itself need not reject the world or human instrumentality in setting the world aright. Reform distinguishes between the earthly kingdom and its heavenly counterpart and carries this distinction further into the matter of human means and the divine end for which the means are employed but not exchanged. Interchangeability of the divine and human is theocracy by human proxy, and hints at the phenomenon of separatist communes that over the centuries broke out like a rash all over Europe and beyond.

REFORM AND THE ANTICLIMAX OF THE CRUSADES

The reform drive thrived on the boundary between sporadic, lackadaisical religious practice and the heady concentration of the separatist moral impulse. Advocates of reform embarked on setting a fresh direction for the religious community. Their familiarity with the sources was a prerequisite of action; a learned class was the holy vanguard of reform. Rather than being an abstract code imposed by outsiders, reform grew out of the experience of a community of practice with a public stake in the fortunes of society. Reformers had been something else, after all. The weaknesses and inadequacies of mainstream society and established religious institutions vis-à-vis God's "plan of salvation" were revealed for all to

see. Only in the minority community of those who separated themselves could the prescription for an alternative path to virtue develop and reach maturation.

According to its proponents, moral reform is not the consequence of statistical advantage, for in their view the moral vocation is a minority vocation precisely because majority life is a function of expedience and compromise. A take-it-for-granted mentality of the majority is incapable of setting the moral compass and only allows the direction of affairs to pass into the hands of the nimble-tongued among the leaders. Diogenes said he carried a lantern in broad daylight in Athens because he was looking for one honest person: it was his dramatic way of showing up the moral failings of the majority of his fellow citizens, though as a one-man show he had no hope of changing society.

Thus it was that when Paul reflected on the life and conduct of the believers at Corinth, with excesses at worship, looseness in morals, retaliatory suits in the law courts, intolerance in doctrine, and uncharitableness in personal relationships, he challenged the church to say what distinguished it from the world. In bringing the prophetic word to critique the church, the apostle diagnosed the ills of the world, suggesting that Christian faithfulness is a prescription for the health of the wider society. In that regard the macrocosm was captured in the moral blueprint of the microcosm. A source of embarrassing weakness in the church was rivalry among the believers themselves, sometimes taking the form of schism. It was the kind of competitiveness that fueled worldly ambition, and failed to uphold the standard by which believers knew and worshiped God (1 Cor. 1:10–16; 3:4–7, 21–22; 4:6–7, 15–16). Although this situation might be expected from the dramatic and haphazard way Christianity was spreading, it could not be allowed to set aside apostolic rule and example or the public call for virtuous living. Worldly wisdom was not a veto of the divine wisdom.

The reform impulse was strengthened, in the first place, by the assertion of apostolic authority, chiefly that of Paul, and in the second place, by the availability of preaching and teaching materials, which were subsequently gathered into the canon of Scripture. The apostles called the believers back to the faith, with detailed instructions on how to receive sinners and backsliders back into fellowship. Sanctions were announced and threatened against persistent offenders. The apostles warned against persisting in sin, holding up the fellowship as the place where offenders found rehabilitation, reassurance, and renewal. For the weak brethren, too, were the merits of the cross. In contrast, the world was held up as the source of false absolutes and perils. Christians were challenged to signal their abhorrence of the world by following a lifestyle of self-control, moderation, endurance, forgiveness, and all the other fruits of the Spirit.

The reforms and the prophetic witness demanded a spiritual understanding of faith. Christians were to set examples of civic duty and political obligation, but political or military instruments were not the goal and end of faith. However exalted, the instruments could not substitute for the end, just as the magistrate could not legislate for the divine lawgiver. The church militant was the church vigilant, and was as such the sign of the promise of God's reign. Prophetic action

in history was the active participation of believers in the sign and promise of God rather than surrender to the world. Religious jihad has no role in the gospel either in the positive sense of imposing a plan of salvation or in the negative sense of purging the world of sin and wickedness. The apostles used combative language, but in terms only of spiritual warfare and moral reformation. The "sword of truth" (*sayf al-haqq*) for Christians was an instrument of spiritual combat, of the "greater jihad," and was as often drawn against themselves as against unbelievers. Converts did not go to the cross, as if the church was somewhere else; they came to the cross.

The idea of the Crusades was alien to the gospel, and, as it happened, was disastrous, too, for Western Christendom. In the Islamic case, by contrast, the Crusades removed not one brick from the edifice of a redoubtable *Dár al-Islám.* On the contrary, by the end of the Crusades the Mongols, and later the Ottoman Turks, had seized the initiative and were preparing to launch Islam on one of its most brilliant phases. No wonder contemporary Muslim historians gave the Crusades little more than anecdotal attention in contrast to the sweeping, strategic obsession of the Latin West with the Crusades. While the Crusaders pillaged the outlying districts of the Muslim empire, the center held, and with it the caliphal structures of power and authority. Arab sources in fact paint a picture of surprising complacency in the court in Baghdad, and of disdain for the "Franks" elsewhere in the Near East.[6]

The Crusaders revealed a picture of Europe far less sophisticated than the Islamic world they encountered. It was as if the Crusades were little more than a nuisance for the central authorities who relied on minor sultans and officers to dispose of the menace. That was how Saladin, for example, rose to prominence. Saladin was a military leader of Kurdish origin, and gained his power from his ability to mobilize against the Crusaders in Syria. He founded the Sunni Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt, wresting power from the Shi'ite Fatimids. The Ayyubids eventually conquered and converted the Christian kingdoms of Axum and Nubia — an unforeseen extended consequence of the Crusades.

All this is by way of saying that the idea of "holy war" was not only alien to the gospel but profoundly damaging to church and society. No such scruples attended the idea of jihad in Islam, whether of jihad as "the greater jihad" of spiritual struggle or as "the lesser jihad" of divinely sanctioned military combat. Islam is not a pacifist religion or a creed for the fainthearted.

The violence of which the early Christians had firsthand knowledge was the violence of persecution. Believers endured horrendous physical privations, on which Tertullian and others reported with alacrity. Yet, however eagerly Christians sought martyrdom and however much they believed that violence had divine purpose, they refrained from taking up arms themselves to assist God to achieve the divine purpose. All that was to change later, but in the founding sources of

6. For a summary of Arab sources on the Crusades, see Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984).

Christian Scripture there is not a scrap of evidence to support armed militancy as faithfulness to the glorified and risen Lord. That was the theme of numerous faithful voices in the era of the Crusades — figures like St. Francis of Assisi, Ramond Lull, and, in later centuries, Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia.

In the end the reform impulse ignited dormant forces to fuel the Christian movement. Once the believers turned their backs on quarantine as an irretrievable stage that might recur in the millennial age but not until then, they widened their repertoire to take in other forms of apologetics. A flexible scale was devised to allow Christians to act meaningfully in the world without losing their identity. The missionary expansion of the faith brought believers to the permanent threshold of plural encounter, and anyone who was seriously committed would now have to face up to the task of translating the gospel across cultures. Mission embodied this prophetic spirit and as such became the end and burden of the church.

In one sense the issue of cross-cultural interpretation had arisen with the very career of Jesus, for the word Jesus brought was the familiar message of the prophets (Luke 4:17–21) with which he expounded his work. He assured his listeners that he had not come to abolish but to complete the law and the prophets, as a later tradition, recorded in Matthew 5:17, makes explicit. His work was not a work of building from scratch but of reinterpreting old and familiar teachings. Consequently the Judaic heritage was an essential force in the rise of Christianity. David Daube has documented with a wealth of detail the close parallel between the New Testament and rabbinic Judaism, in his influential book of that title (Daube 1956). Christianity was born in a cross-cultural milieu, with translation as its birthmark.

Commenting on the multiple cultural forms that Christianity rapidly took in the course of its progress, Harnack returns to the Judaic theme, and, although he conceives a "defective" break at the Christian turning with Judaism, he admits enough of a debt to indicate a strong element of continuity. He affirms:

> Christianity may be just as truly called a Hellenic religion as an Oriental, a native religion as a foreign. From the very outset it had been syncretistic upon pagan soil; it made its appearance, not as a gospel pure and simple, but equipped with all that Judaism had already acquired during the course of its long history, and entering forthwith upon nearly every task in which Judaism was defective. (Harnack 1908, 1:314)

The syncretist motif endured across the extraordinary range of Christian appeal. In the first place, diverse nationalities were touched by Christian preaching, such as Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Greeks, and barbarians, who were among the community of believers and sympathizers. In the second place, Christian religious practice showed an enormous appetite for absorbing materials from other sources, the result in part of the success in penetrating the wider society, and in part a reflection of the religion's syncretist potential, with excesses checked by the central place Jesus Christ occupied in apostolic teaching. Christianity was soon confronted by a dynamic religious milieu of a rapid turnover of beliefs and

practices, creating bewildering challenges and options. It left a deep imprint on the new religion. Harnack sums it up as follows:

> Powerful and vigorous, assured of her own distinctive character, and secure from any risk of being dissolved into contemporary religions, [the church] believed herself able now to deal more generously and complaisantly with men. . . . Saints and intercessors, who were thus semi-gods, poured into the church. Local cults and holy places were instituted. The different provinces of life were distributed afresh among guardian spirits. The old gods returned; only their masks were new. Annual festivals were noisily celebrated. Amulets and charms, relics and bones of the saints, were cherished eagerly. And the very religion which erstwhile in its strictly scriptural temper had prohibited and resisted any tendency towards materialism, now took material shape in every one of its relationships. It had mortified the world and nature. But now it proceeded to revive them, not of course in their entirety, but still in certain sections and details, and . . . in phases that were dead and repulsive. Miracles in the churches became more numerous, more external, and more coarse. Whatever fables the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles had narrated, were dragged into contemporary life and predicated of the living present. (Harnack 1908, 1:315–17)

This mixed religious picture is the contrast of quarantine, which the middle term of reform tries to bridge. Although Christianity gladly embraced multiple cultural systems congenial to its message, the religion was not the residual form of any one system. Harnack sums up the risk and the hope of the new universal world of syncretism to which the missionary proclamation brought the church. Christianity, Harnack says, showed itself to be syncretistic. Yet, he continues:

> It revealed to the world a special kind of syncretism, namely the syncretism of a universal religion. . . . Unconsciously, it had learned and borrowed from many quarters; indeed it would be impossible to imagine it existing amid all the wealth and vigor of these religions, had it not drawn pith and flavour even from them. These religions fertilized the ground for it, and the new grain and seed which fell upon that soil sent down its roots and grew to be a mighty tree. Here is a religion which embraces everything. And yet it can always be expressed with absolute simplicity: one name, the name of Jesus Christ, still sums up everything. (Harnack 1908, 1:312)

Christianity entered the multiple world of cross-cultural encounter with an open mind and a firm faith. The risk that it took with its openness it exploited with its audacious faith. The Greco-Roman world, which left its mark on the faith, was consequently remolded from within. The central pillars of the Aristotelian and Platonic systems concerning the demonstrability of knowledge were absorbed and reconstituted. In that world, too, the reform impulse, charged with faith in one God, welled up to overwhelm the syllogistic trickle of the elite. R. G. Collingwood, a modern philosopher, expounds this issue thus:

> And all the best Greco-Roman thought devoted its powers to elaborating and manipulating this beautiful instrument of precision, the Aristotelian syllogism. Into a world so occupied, Christianity, however truly foreshadowed and prepared by many tendencies of the Greco-Roman mind, came as a destructive and revolutionary force. Instead of a syllogistic logic, it preached faith as the organ of knowledge; instead of a natural world, it set up, as the sole object of that knowledge, God. Human thought, hitherto dissipated in a syllogistic network over the infinite field of natural fact, was now to be focussed upon a single point, and in that concentration to substitute immediate conviction for reasoned argument. Thus the Platonic position was reversed. Plato had considered faith an inferior kind of knowledge, because it could not, when challenged, argue in its own defense. Christianity saw in the same fact a ground of its superiority. . . . It was because the object of faith is God; and God, being infinite, has no relation to anything outside himself by which he can be indirectly known. . . . There is no resemblance between God and a Euclidean axiom; and the intellectual intuition that grasps the axiom cannot grasp God. Yet the whole of Christianity depends for its value on the assurance that God is revealed in us; and that implies on our part some faculty capable of accepting the revelation. That is the primitive Christian conception of faith.
>
> Christianity, more Aristotelian than Aristotle, recognized that two faculties whose objects were so widely different must themselves widely differ: the faith by which we apprehend the infinite and wholly spiritual nature of God must be utterly unlike the perception by which we apprehend the particular finite things in the world of sense. . . . In exalting faith above reason, therefore, Christianity was not in any sense undoing the work of Greek thought, but rather building upon it. . . . What Christianity added to Greek thought was the idea of a yet higher kind of knowledge, a knowledge in which we apprehend not the finite but the infinite, not nature but spirit, not the world but God. (Collingwood 1927–28, 4–5)

When the apostles proclaimed the message against the specifically Judaic background of Palestine, they achieved a breakthrough by upholding faith in one God. Moved by the life and ministry of Jesus, they reasoned that radical faith in one God demanded a radical break with cultural idolatry. As a consequence, mission pursued the Spirit's promptings in all the important cultural sectors. This had a tolerant, purifying impact on culture by drawing its xenophobic sting. Christian pluralism in which cultural interchangeability became the norm was the result. Thanks to the unimpeachable evidence that Gentiles were unreservedly accepted before God — a fact vindicated by the sending down of the Spirit at Pentecost — cultural favoritism lost its moral rationale. No one dared repudiate what God declared accepted.

The reform impulse stripped culture of its absolutizing tendencies by subjecting it to the scheme of God's absolute and universal discretion. The

Jewish-Gentile frontier was a moral plumb line of God's uncircumscribed generosity, which gave reform its historical justification, and cleansed syncretism without converting it into utopian quarantine. There was now not one cultural center but a multiple frontier where the saving God was the new exclusive center of gravity. No one culture was any longer the exclusive standard of the redemptive power of the one God, a position that challenged the Greco-Roman world as relentlessly as it had done the Judaic world. In his observations on the birth of a new historiography, R. G. Collingwood in a different work alludes to this issue of culture presuming to be divine norm:

> For the Christian, all men are equal in the sight of God: there is no chosen people, no privileged race or class, no one community whose fortunes are more important than those of another. All persons and all people are involved in the working out of God's purpose, and therefore the historical process is everywhere and always of the same kind, and every part of it is a part of the same whole. The Christian cannot be content with Roman history or Jewish history or any other partial and particularistic history: he demands a history of the world, a universal history whose theme shall be the general development of God's purpose for human life. The infusion of Christian ideas overcomes not only the characteristic humanism and the substantialism of Greco-Roman history, but also its particularism. . . . Greco-Roman ecumenical history is not universal history in this sense, because it has a particularistic centre of gravity. Greece or Rome is the centre round which it revolves. Christian universal history has undergone a Copernican revolution, whereby the very idea of such a centre of gravity is destroyed. (Collingwood 1946, 49–50)

With its sense of exclusive cultural entitlement, the ideology of particularism constitutes an affront that reform must contest openly. Particularism attempts to corner the market on God's favor and to foster a spirit of ethnic righteousness, while, for their part, Christians as equal members assembled at prayer and worship even though society cared little for such equality. Lactantius (d. c. A.D. 320) of North Africa, for example, notes that the concept of equality, implying not equity, the virtue of giving judgment, but the sense of justice, of treating others as one's equals — what Cicero calls "equability" — was peculiar to the Christians.

Lactantius said that God who gave being and life to everyone was the same who wished us all to be equal, and to be alike in our potential as moral agents. God it was who laid down the same terms of life for us all, giving us the capacity of wisdom and a longing for eternal fellowship. God, he stressed, excluded no one from the benefits of heaven just as in our earthly lives God gave everyone a place in the daylight, nurtured the earth for the benefit of all, and provided nourishment and precious, relaxing sleep. Based on the ideals of the fellowship, Christian values of equality and justice promoted a forward-looking outlook. The decline or loss of these values has typically provoked a call for reform, with the demand to reject worldliness. Tertullian's stringent rule that the blood of the

martyrs is the seed of the church was understood in the stark sense that the church should not relax the requirement to suffer for one's faith and should bar those who relented under persecution. That sentiment was recycled to justify periodic peaceful reform.

Quarantine, syncretism, and reform must not be understood in exclusive terms, for there is a natural overlap among them. In the event, it would be better to think of them not as successive stages but as types and styles of religious organization and activity, sometimes all existing together, whatever the degree of intensity in each case. What actually happens may be a function of place and circumstance rather than of precise temporal sequence. It would be too artificial to set up a watertight compartment among them, as it is possible to slide back and forth among all three types. As a schematic representation the model, however, is designed to depict major historical rhythms in the process of the expansion and consolidation of Christianity. In spite of overlaps and subtle continuities, the tripartite model is still useful for allowing us to distinguish characteristic phases of religious life and action among the early Christians. Furthermore, the model enables us to place the impulse of reform in a continuum in which religious change acts as a check on cultural exclusivity. Quarantine and accommodation between them threaten religious integrity: quarantine by shutting out the world, and accommodation by surrendering to it. Reform, on the other hand, points to God's action where the message intersects the world of culture, and mission becomes the pathway to the future.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A summary of the several points made in this chapter may be offered by way of a conclusion. The first is that primitive Christians inherited in Judaism the law and the synagogue as the defining standards of religion. The second is that from their understanding of the life and work of Jesus Christ, the early Christians arrived at a fresh view about God's impartial action in all cultures. The "many tongues" of Pentecost demonstrate that God accepts all cultures within the scheme of salvation, reinforcing the position that Jews and Gentiles are equal before God. The third is that the Gentile breakthrough has become the paradigm of the church's missionary call. So far as their view of Jesus is concerned, the disciples saw him as the resurrected Lord and Savior, and surrendered the titles "Rabbi" and "Messiah" to the terms of the Easter experience: Jesus died and rose again to begin the reign of God. Fourth, believers expanded the idea of the covenant and proceeded to "make disciples of all nations," beginning in Jerusalem but going beyond to Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Smyrna, Athens, Rome, and other places.

The encounter of the first Christians with Judaism was crucial for the fledgling religion. Jewish particularity became a safeguard against monotheist compromise, and the Jewish Diaspora a check and a pathfinder for the young church. Nevertheless, Christians adopted many foreign religious materials as they absorbed (and were absorbed in) powerful prevailing intellectual and cultural currents, such as

Gnosticism. It left primitive Christianity at risk of being subsumed as an accessory of the dominant cultural systems of the age. Proximity created open borders. Mission intervened to check syncretism by an assertion of the prophetic impulse to drive the conversion movement beyond the temple and the Lyceum. For the missionary movement, Adam was the apple of the age of Pentecost. The test that new converts should pass was not as cultural apprentices but as beneficiaries of God's universal forward-looking generosity. With its roots in Sinai, the Jerusalem church embraced Calvary and Easter as the new open benchmarks of the Gentile dispensation.

Paul entered the scene to affirm that dispensation decisively. His ministry was a turning point by formulating pluralism as the necessary corollary to the religion he believed Jesus preached. That pluralism was rooted for Paul in the Gentile experience, which in turn justified intercultural openness in mission. Paul's claim that God does not absolutize any culture — because God is not guilty of divine partisanship — however high in esteem culture may be, is key to a fresh idea of religion. The second is that all cultures have cast upon them the breath of God's favor, thus cleansing them of the stigma of inferiority and illegitimacy. These two ideas constitute what we may regard as the incipient radical pluralism of Pauline thought. When he stressed faith against works, Paul was enunciating the inclusive principle of God's right and freedom to choose us without regard to our cultural trophies, or to a lack of them. As the absolute gift of a loving, gracious God, faith is the leveling, transcendent force in culture. Western psychology and its theological variants have subjectivized the issue, pitting individual self-regard against objective truth. In fact, Paul wished above all to safeguard the cultural particularity of Jew as Jew and Gentile as Gentile, while challenging Jews and Gentiles to see in Jesus Christ their true hope and salvation.

Paul's legacy to the church includes this exacting vigilance over the slipperiness of culture. Christian life bears the indelible stamp of culture, and faithful stewardship includes holding up the standard of prophetic witness in culture, and sometimes even against culture. Paul was a cultural iconoclast in his defiance of the idolatrous claims of culture, yet he was not a cultural cynic, for in his view God's purposes are mediated through cultural streams in their concrete particularity.

In mission the church applied this insight by recognizing all cultures and the languages in which they are embodied as lawful in God's eyes, making it possible to render God's word into other languages without reservation. Even if in practice Christians wished to stop the translation process, claiming their form of it as final and exclusive, they have not been able to suppress it for all time and for others. It is this process that the concept of translatability tries to represent. In acknowledging that Christianity has fostered "ethnic identity" across the world, we also recognize the winnowing that comes with mission as Gentile openness, especially in matters of ethnic exclusiveness. The travail of much of the world can be traced to the ravages wrought on ethnic and racial groups least able to defend themselves against powerful groups and nations. Christianity's vital impulse is

encoded in its intercultural mission and in the mind-set of new and different possibilities.

Christian cultural attitudes may be described in three broad categories:

- First is *quarantine,* in which ideas of purity and high ethical seriousness are nurtured in isolation, often in defiance of the world. Quarantine is viable only as a short-span measure; otherwise it wanes over the *longue durée.*
- The second is *accommodation,* wherein compromise with the world proceeds alongside intermittent religious observance.
- The third is *prophetic reform,* in which moral objections against the lapses of mainstream society are laid and the demand raised to change course.

Translatability plays a role in religious change by providing a popular base of appeal and by supplying the text for reform and renewal. It is for this reason that the successful example of a Hellenic church faced serious challenge once the Byzantine Empire under Justinian set out to snuff out provincial expressions that were considered aberrations or worse, including regional and provincial expressions of the faith (Kreider 2007, 125–33).