

Ressourcement and Mission

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In recent years, Evangelicals have joined Catholics in participating in ressourcement, “the self-renewal of a people from the original sources of its life” (Dulles). This has involved appropriating insights from “the Great Tradition” of the church’s first five centuries for today’s postmodern, post-Christendom world. This “exchange of gifts” between past and present Christians is valuable especially in the area of mission. This paper proposes several practices and assumptions of the pre-Christendom Christians that are worth exploring by Christians today: worship of God for God’s own sake, without a primary focus on seekers; worship that forms the worshipers to be missionally attractive; catechesis that shapes Christians to have alternative habits and distinctive reflexes; and worship that takes place in domestic settings. These themes, illustrated in the witness of Christians today, show how wisdom from pre-Christendom can be a source of hope and fresh ideas in Christian mission in a post-Christendom world.

Thoughtful Christians have always sensed that they have a distinctive relationship to the past. Of course, Christians have not always found their faith’s big story to be helpful. At times they have found it embarrassing, constricting, and violent, filled with abuse and hypocrisy. Not surprisingly, Christians have often dismissed the past as “dead tradition.”

Nevertheless, Christians have accorded exceptional authority to the past. Often a rediscovered awareness of the past has fuelled renewal. For example, in the mid-twentieth century Christians in many traditions found new insights and energy as they reappropriated

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insights from the past. This reappropriation has been especially common among Roman Catholics, who called the renewed engagement *ressourcement*. Cardinal Avery Dulles, SJ defined *ressourcement* as “the self-renewal of a people from the original sources of its own life.”¹ And during the second half of the twentieth century *ressourcement* had a profound influence on Roman Catholic life. *Ressourcement* was one of the major streams flowing through Vatican II, and through the council it had a significant impact on Catholic liturgy, theology, and religious communities.² An example of this impact is the Vatican II decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, which directed each religious order to seek renewal by returning “to the sources of the whole of the Christian life and to [its own] primitive inspiration.”³ As they have engaged in *ressourcement*, Catholic thinkers drew upon a wide range of sources, and especially upon the church fathers. As one of the progenitors of *ressourcement*, the Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac, put it: “Each time . . . that Christian renewal has flourished . . . it has flourished under the sign of the Fathers.”⁴

In the twenty-first century Christians of many traditions are engaging in *ressourcement*, and Evangelicals are taking the lead. Evangelical *ressourcement* owes much to the life work of the late Robert Webber, whose books on the “Ancient-Future Church” culminated in the 2006 document “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future.”⁵ The fruits of Evangelical *ressourcement* include books on patristic theology published by InterVarsity Press and Baker Academic, articles in *Christianity Today*, and, symbolically, the Wheaton Theology Conference of April 2007.

The Wheaton conference was fascinating. It brought together a wide variety of people—Calvinists and Methodists, Anglicans and Anabaptists, new monastics and ancient-future liturgists—in an

¹ Avery Dulles, SJ, “Tradition and Creativity in Theology,” *First Things* 27 (November 1992): 23.

² John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 42.

³ *Perfectae Caritatis, Decree on the Up-to-date Renewal of Religious Life* (1965), §2, in Austin Flannery, OP, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975), 612.

⁴ Henri de Lubac, SJ, *At the Service of the Church* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 1993), 95–96.

⁵ The document may be found at the website of the Robert E. Webber Center for an Ancient Evangelical Future, www.aefcall.org.

atmosphere of excitement and expectancy.⁶ Some of the conference's papers appeared in *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, edited by Mark Husbands and Jeffrey P. Greenman,⁷ a collection of essays by Evangelical scholars who engage in *ressourcement*.

Listening to the early Christians, as these Evangelical practitioners of *ressourcement* do, is important. It involves engaging in what Sri Lankan evangelist Vinoth Ramachandra calls "humble conversations" with brothers and sisters in the body of Christ in other periods and other places.⁸ Of course, these Christians cannot tell us what to do or what to think, but they have a continuing contribution to make. According to Cambridge historian Sir Herbert Butterfield, the early Christians can offer "relevant clues" about the attitudes we should adopt in a world in which Christians can no longer engage in "inducement and compulsion."⁹ Or, in the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams, the early Christians, along with believers from other periods, can present us with an "immeasurable exchange of gifts . . . an exchange between living and dead."¹⁰

It may be that American Christians are especially tempted to silence the past. Is this because we are present-minded and imagine that little that is relevant to our witness happened between the New Testament and the current situation? Is it because we are only interested in what missiologist Andrew Walls calls "clan history," the history that produced our particular part of the Christian family?¹¹ Is it because we are tempted to tell only the stories that ratify our views and do not challenge our preferences? Whatever the reasons, the results can be deadly. When we muzzle the past, we silence God.

⁶ Chris Armstrong, "The Future Lies in the Past: Why Evangelicals Are Connecting with the Early Church as They Move into the 21st Century," *Christianity Today* (February 2008): 22–29.

⁷ Mark Husbands and Jeffrey P. Greenman, eds., *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

⁸ Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1996), 282.

⁹ Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 135.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 27.

¹¹ Andrew F. Walls, "Eusebius Tries Again: The Task of Reconceiving and Re-visioning the Study of Christian History," in Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., *Enlarging the Story: Perspectives on Writing World Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 7.

But, when Evangelicals and Catholics—across a range of ecclesial affiliations, incorporating Anglicans and others—engage in *ressourcement*, when they drink newly from sources that they view as their common heritage, exciting possibilities emerge that enable God to speak freshly to the church today. *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future* is a sign of this freshness. As editor Mark Husbands says in his introduction: “Standing in the shadow of de Lubac, we believe that Christianity cannot meet the challenges of modernity or post-modernity without returning to the tradition of the early church.”¹² *Ressourcement*, Husbands contends, is essential for the future not only of Evangelical Christianity but of Christianity generally.

I agree, but I also have questions, two of which came to the fore as I mulled over the chapters in *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future* and pondered Husbands's words of introduction. Both questions relate to mission.

What does “the tradition of the early church” mean?

One of the authors in the *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future* volume urged his readers to understand the gospel by entering “the world of the church fathers.”¹³ An influential Evangelical theologian recently wrote of “the Great Tradition grounded in the first five centuries of the church's history.”¹⁴ Such statements are common, but I find them unhelpful because they ignore the significant changes that occurred within the first five centuries and the ways that the church fathers differed with each other. For example, the *Didache* and Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* both occur within those five centuries, but their contexts and contents are very dissimilar. Speaking broadly of “the tradition of the early church” fails to ask whether and how things changed in the first five centuries. Indeed, it does not explore the possibility that within the patristic era the church may have moved from one Gestalt¹⁵ to another; from a Gestalt symbolized by

¹² Mark Husbands, “Introduction,” in Husbands and Greenman, *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, 12.

¹³ Christopher A. Hall, “Tradition, Authority, Magisterium: Dead End or New Horizon?,” in Husbands and Greenman, *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future*, 43.

¹⁴ Rodney Clapp, *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, Not Angels* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004), 14.

¹⁵ Gestalt: “a structure, configuration, or pattern of . . . phenomena so integrated as to constitute a functional unit with properties not derivable by summation of its

the house, the domestic domain, to a Gestalt symbolized by the basilica, the public domain; or, in other words, from early Christianity to early Christendom.

I believe that such a Gestalt-shift took place and that it had many facets, but in this article I will explore only one facet—mission.¹⁶ In Gestalt I (early Christianity) the Christians grew rapidly in numbers, despite the fact that they were powerless, marginal, and at times persecuted. They met in houses, repudiated coercion, lived in distinctive ways, and grew not least because they were attractive. But in the course of the fourth century the churches' circumstances changed markedly, and by the fifth century a second Gestalt had come into being whose facets were configured differently. In this new Gestalt, the Christian church continued to grow, but for new reasons. Emperors espoused the church and showered it with privileges and endowments, and aristocrats emerged to lead it. In the fourth century the church, which in earlier centuries had grown by attraction, now grew by advantage; and in the fifth century the church grew by compulsion. This growth "by the carrot and the stick"¹⁷ led to Gestalt II (early Christendom). At least as far as mission is concerned, it is unilluminating to deal with all five centuries as though they represent one consecutive and univocal tradition.

How can Christians today with integrity seek ressourcement from the first five centuries?

The editors of *Ancient Faith and the Future Church* claim that Christians today "cannot meet the challenges of modernity

parts." *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 2003), 525.

¹⁶ Writers who deal with mission in early Christianity appear to dodge the issue of a possible fourth/fifth-century Gestalt shift. For example, Michael Green, in *Evangelism in the Early Church*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003), concludes his story with Origen, at about 250. More recently, Roman Catholic missiologists Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, in *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004), deal with the early church in the West, ending in 301, and then shift their attention to East Syria and the Irish monks. Neither tells the fourth-century story of the missionary methods in the Roman imperial heartlands that produced Christendom.

¹⁷ Michele Renee Salzman, "The Evidence for the Conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in Book 16 of the *Theodosian Code*," *Historia* 42 (1993): 378.

or post-modernity without returning to the tradition of the early church.”¹⁸ Quite apart from the assumption that there was a singular tradition, will a return to early Christianity confirm what we already know or will it shake us up and offer us unanticipated possibilities? The Evangelical *ressourcement* project talks about the challenges of post-modernity, which is necessary, but it ignores the challenges of a second “post”—post-Christendom. Perhaps this is because the conference’s speakers were largely from the United States, where many Christians are not aware that the very existence of Christendom is an issue. But elsewhere—in my experience in England, Canada, and Australasia—it is evident that a Christendom-like equivalence between Christianity and the nation’s population, culture, and institutions does not exist. These post-Christendom cultures confront us with challenges and choices. To us in post-Christendom, the first five centuries, the centuries of “the great tradition,” offer us not one approach to mission but a choice of approaches; they offer us not one Gestalt, but a choice of Gestalts. So *ressourcement* invites us not only to drink from the sources, but to choose which sources it is healthy to drink from.

Observations on the Pre-Christendom Christians (Gestalt I)

For some years I have been engaging with the writings of the early Christians, attempting to understand their approaches to mission. As fruits of these investigations I offer four observations, each of which has implications for us today in mission in the world of post-Christendom. All four observations come from Gestalt I, the Gestalt of the Christians of the first three centuries.

Observation 1. In pre-Christendom, the church’s witness did not depend on its worship being attractive to outsiders. In the earliest churches, Christians met in homes in which some members of the household may not have been believers, but who nevertheless mingled with the Christians and guests and sat at table with them. However, in the mid-first century, after the emperor Nero began to persecute the Christians seriously, many Christian communities restricted the access of non-believers to their domestic worship services. They not only debarred people who had not been baptized from the eucharist, they also

¹⁸ Husbands, “Introduction,” in Husbands and Greenman, *Ancient Faith for the Church’s Future*, 12.

excluded from the *synaxis*, the service of the word, people who had not been admitted to the catechumenate.¹⁹ Within households this boundary-setting must have raised difficult issues, but it is clear that reasons of security were in their minds. As Origen put it in the 240s, “Christians perform their rites and teach their doctrines in secret, and . . . they do this with good reason to escape the penalty that hangs over them.”²⁰ The Christians closed the doors even though this led to widespread gossip. According to an early third-century pagan, “Their form of feasting is notorious; it is in everyone’s mouth.”²¹ This reflected the tendency of the Christians’ critics to project their lurid imaginations onto the believers’ private behavior. But it also showed that the Christians were interesting enough to gossip about. The churches posted deacons at their doorways to debar outsiders from coming into their meetings.²² Nevertheless, the number of outsiders who became Christians grew steadily. This was not because the Christian worship services were attractive to unbelievers, for the unbelievers were not there, and attracting unbelievers was not why the believers worshiped God. But the growing Christian communities persisted in weekly, at times daily, meetings for worship.

Observation 2. In pre-Christendom worship Christians glorified God, and God formed them into attractive Christians. According to Everett Ferguson, the worship of the early Christians was especially characterized by praise.²³ Week by week, after their reading of scripture and at times letters from churches in other parts of the world, their homilies imparted the teachings and story of Jesus and applied them to life, and their prayers wrestled with God. Their worship culminated in the eucharist in which believers thankfully feasted on God. In their worship the Christians delighted in God and glorified God. Their worship was God-centered.

But their worship had a peculiar by-product: formation. As the believers worshiped God, God was forming them to be attractive, question-posing Christians. “With us,” according to the second-century Athenian apologist Athenagoras, “you will find unlettered

¹⁹ Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, Alcuin/GROW Joint Liturgical Studies 32 (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 1995), 8–10.

²⁰ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.3.

²¹ Caecilius, in Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 9.6.

²² *Testamentum Domini* 1.36.

²³ Everett Ferguson, ed., *Early Christians Speak*, vol. 1 (Abilene, Tex.: Abilene Christian University Press, 1981), 143.

people, tradesmen and old women, who, though unable to express in words the advantages of our teaching, demonstrate by acts the value of their principles. For they do not rehearse speeches, but evidence good deeds. When struck they do not strike back; when robbed, they do not sue; to those who ask, they give, and they love their neighbors as themselves.”²⁴ The texts indicate that Christians lived in a distinctive way, and that people who saw them wondered why they lived as they did.

The early Christians may not have realized that their distinctive lifestyle was a result of their worship. But that is precisely what a number of sources indicate that it was, and there is evidence that their leaders knew that their worship had formative power. According to the third-century Syrian *Didascalia Apostolorum*, each Sunday after the prayers, but before the eucharist, the deacon intoned, “Is there perhaps someone that keeps a grudge against his fellow?”²⁵ At this point, most likely while the members of the community exchanged the kiss of peace, members who during the week had offended each other asked forgiveness before participating in the eucharist. The author of the *Didascalia* saw this practice not just as a part of the church’s pastoral life but as a part of its missional outreach. The author refers to the *Didascalia*’s non-homogeneous community: “We by the power of the Lord God have gathered [people] from all peoples and from all towns.”²⁶ So the reconciling and kissing bonded the community together. It transformed people from non-equals in the wider society into equals in the church’s fictive family who could “kiss on the level.”²⁷ This equality, formed in worship, led the believers to behave in reflexive ways that were unsettling. For example, in 203 in Carthage on the emperor’s birthday, thousands of people gathered in the city’s arena to be entertained by the death of Christians. After undergoing torture, the Christians who had already been bloodied by wild beasts were brought to the place of maximum visibility to be entertainingly executed. But before the executioners did their work, the sociologically disparate believers, including the aristocratic Perpetua, the slave Felicity, and the humbly born Saturus, did something surprising: they

²⁴ Athenagoras, *Legatio* 11.

²⁵ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 2.54.

²⁶ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 2.56.

²⁷ Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 63.

“sealed their martyrdom with the kiss of peace.”²⁸ Disconcertingly, instead of cringing, the Christians publicly kissed each other, across class lines, the slave with the noble woman. In extremis, they engaged in this leveling form of kissing because they did it every week in worship. In their final actions before they died, they did reflexively what their liturgical life had formed them to do.

In the surviving early Christian homilies, the bishops and presbyters challenged the believers to let their worship make their lives articulate. They did not urge the believers to speak about their faith. Repeatedly, however, they urged the believers to live what they had learned in worship. In a second-century sermon known as 2 Clement, a preacher admonished his flock as follows: In worship you have received a vision of life in Christ that calls his followers to “love your enemies and those who hate you.” So make sure that you live this vision, so onlookers may see that your deeds are authentic, “worthy of the words we utter.” But if we Christians do not live what we say, the preacher warned, the pagans will “scoff at the name [of Christian].”²⁹

Between the death of the apostle Paul and the accession of the emperor Constantine, there must have been countless evangelists, but the early Christian texts did not eulogize them or even mention them by name; nor did the texts urge all believers to share their faith verbally with the outsiders. Instead the texts called all Christians, living in the presence of the outsiders, to embody their faith. And there is evidence that some Christians behaved in ways that interested the outsiders. For example, the Christian communities provided free burial for all the baptized; they rescued the exposed infants (often girl babies) from the refuse heaps and raised them as their own children; in times of pandemic they provided nursing care for desperately ill pagans as well as Christians; and they manifested a lifestyle of non-retaliatory patience.³⁰ As the Christians worshiped God, God shaped them to behave distinctively and to demonstrate alternative ways of

²⁸ *Acta Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 21.

²⁹ 2 *Clement* 13.3–4.

³⁰ Wolfgang Wischmeyer, *Von Golgatha zum Ponte Molle: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der Kirche im dritten Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), chap. 6; Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), chaps. 4–5; Everett Ferguson, “Love of Enemies and Non-retaliation in the Second Century,” in Rodney L. Petersen and Calvin Augustine Pater, eds., *The Contentious Triangle: Church, State, and University* (Kirksville, Mo.: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999), 82, 92.

living. Early Christian apologists were able to appeal to the behavior of Christians as evidence of the truth of the Christians' convictions. As Minucius Felix put it around 200, "We do not preach great things, but we live them."³¹ A century later Lactantius wrote, "We do not entice, as they say; but we teach, we prove, we show."³² Christians emerged from their worship as attractive, question-posing people.

Observation 3. Rigorous catechesis was essential. It formed the apprentice Christians, preparing them for baptism by teaching, example, and experience so they developed alternative habits and distinctive reflexes. According to Justin Martyr, in catechesis Christians learned the "fair commands of Jesus." The reasons that Justin offered for imparting the teachings of Jesus to the catechumens were missional; as non-believers see Christians living the teachings of Jesus, they will want to "share with us the good hope."³³ Justin was convinced that the teachings of Jesus were converting of catechumens and of pagans. He did not say how this worked, but he observed that "many . . . have turned from the ways of violence and tyranny, overcome by observing the consistent lives of their [believing] neighbors, or noting the strange patience of their injured acquaintances, or experiencing the way they did business with them."³⁴ A century after Justin, the North African bishop Cyprian urged the catechist Quirinus to teach his catechumens that "the kingdom of God is not in the wisdom of the world, nor in eloquence, but in the faith of the cross and in virtue of behavior."³⁵ Recent research has argued that Cyprian's catechesis was directed especially to re-form the catechumens so they would live simply and nonviolently.³⁶ The well-known *Apostolic Tradition*,³⁷ a prime example of this tradition of life-transforming catechesis,

³¹ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 38.6.

³² Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.20.

³³ Justin, *First Apology* 14.

³⁴ Justin, *First Apology* 16.

³⁵ Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum* 3.69.

³⁶ Andy Alexis-Baker, "Ad Quirinum Book Three and Cyprian's Catechumenate," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17, no. 3 (2009): 357–380.

³⁷ Although the *Apostolic Tradition's* authorship and place and time of origin are controversial, the debate today seems to be whether the text reflects practices of the third-century church in Rome in part or in whole. See Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 80–83; Alistair Stewart-Sykes, ed., *Hippolytus, On the Apostolic Tradition* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 49–50.

prescribed a catechumenate with surprising characteristics. Not only did the *Apostolic Tradition* make it hard for outsiders to be admitted, it also required those who were admitted to participate in a period of formation that lasted up to three years; and it urged the catechists and sponsors to monitor the catechumens' behavior carefully. Before admitting a catechumen to "hear the gospel" (the community's Rule of Faith?) and receive final preparation for baptism, the community's leaders were to ask: "Have [the candidates] lived good lives when they were catechumens? Have they honored the widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every kind of good work? [If they have], let them hear the gospel."³⁸

It is remarkable that the *Apostolic Tradition* gave such importance to visiting the sick, and we may wonder why. Possibly it was because for its writers "the sick" in shorthand fashion represented the people to whom Jesus pointed in Matthew 25:31–46. In this passage, Jesus in judgment asks of everyone, I was sick; did you visit me? I was hungry; did you give me food? And I was thirsty, a stranger, naked, in prison; did you help me? If this Matthean passage was in the minds of the redactors of the *Apostolic Tradition*, it is not surprising that they assumed that people could be receptive to the gospel only after they had been formed to respond to Jesus' presence in needy people. It comes as no surprise that Bishop Cyprian in his catechetical writings makes the Matthew 25 text foundational for Christian formation,³⁹ for he knew that it was primarily through lived experience that the apprentice Christians developed an understanding of the gospel.

The long catechetical journey culminated in the Easter Vigil, in which the catechumens were baptized in an impressive ritual that led to their first communion. According to the *Canons of Hippolytus*, a text in the *Apostolic Tradition's* tradition written in Egypt in the 330s, the catechetical journey formed Christians whose lives were attractive:

[The baptized who have completed catechesis] have become complete Christians and have been fed with the body of Christ. They will strive in wisdom, so that their life may shine with virtue, not before each other [only], but also before the Gentiles so that

³⁸ *Apostolic Tradition* 20, in *Hippolytus: A Text for Students*, ed. G. J. Cuming, Grove Liturgical Study 8 (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove Books, 1987), 17.

³⁹ Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum* 2.30, 3.1; Cyprian, *On Works and Alms* 23.

they may imitate them and become Christians and see that the progress of those who have been illuminated is high and better than the common behavior of people.⁴⁰

Observation 4. The worship of pre-Christendom churches took place in domestic settings. There was a wide range of domestic settings—from the tenements that Robert Jewett has posited for early congregations in Rome to the exceptional house in Dura-Europos that archaeologists have studied closely.⁴¹ Both were home churches. So also were churches that met in dwellings in *insulae* (urban apartment blocks) that Peter Oakes has seen as models for Pauline congregations.⁴² Oakes's approach is fascinating because it indicates that an *insula* offered the early Christians a variety of meeting spaces. Christian groups of thirty to forty could meet in a domestic unit that might be a stonemason's workshop. As these groups grew in size, they could divide, or they could enlarge their house by removing walls, or they could move to a larger unit within the same *insula*, all the while remaining domestic in ethos. Of course these Christians, who met in private, were visible to their neighbors and accessible for conversation. And their worship might include practices that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 14. According to recent work by scholars in many Christian traditions,⁴³ 1 Corinthians 11–14 records a two-part Greco-Roman banquet in which there was a meal (chapter 11) followed by a *symposium* (chapter 14). The meal, in which the Christians remembered Jesus ritually, involved consuming food and drink that also fed hungry members. The after-dinner *symposium* provided opportunity for the gifts of “all” and “each” to emerge (14:26); and, in this way, it enabled the divine narrative remembered in the meal to connect with the narratives of the believers. In the *symposium*, all believers had opportunity to participate, and outsiders, who sensed that God was

⁴⁰ *The Canons of Hippolytus* 19, ed. Paul Bradshaw (Nottingham, UK: Grove Books, 1987), 25.

⁴¹ Robert Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10,” *Biblical Research* 38 (1993): 23–43; L. Michael White, *Building God's House in the Roman World* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Paul Post, “Dura Europos Revisited: Rediscovering Sacred Space,” *Worship* 86, no. 3 (2012): 222–243.

⁴² Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii: Paul's Letter at Ground Level* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2009).

⁴³ Listed in Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission After Christendom* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2011), 279.

disclosing the secrets of their hearts, might fall to their faces and say “God is really among you” (14:24).

To be sure, after Nero’s persecution the congregations in many places began to close the doors to the outsiders; but the Christians’ earliest form of worship—with real food and drink, and a meal before multivoiced worship (the sacrament before the word)—was still common in North Africa in the mid-third century.⁴⁴ In some places, as Justin reports from Rome, by the middle of the second century a more compact morning service, with word before sacrament, had replaced the expansive dinner of Corinth and Carthage.⁴⁵ But even in Justin’s Rome the setting remained domestic. In their worship services Christians could talk about their lives, share food and clothing, practice catechesis as well as worship, and allow the social ingredients of fictive family to develop. Recent research has indicated that throughout the fourth century there continued to be house churches which at times were quite large.⁴⁶

Ressourcement: *Hypotheses for Mission Today*

In light of these four observations, what implications can we draw for mission today? What does *ressourcement* for mission look like? *Ressourcement* is not a template and it will not tell us what to do. The “tradition” of the church as it developed was not infallible; at times the church made mistakes. In the fourth century Christianity in the Roman empire moved in new directions, some of which were brilliant, and some of which were problematic. Liturgical scholar Robert Taft, SJ has referred to the fourth-century developments as “the survival of the fittest—of the fittest, not necessarily of the best.”⁴⁷ These post-Constantinian changes that characterize Gestalt II are a part of the story of Christians in the West and, for good or for ill, they have shaped all of us. Some of these developments may still be fitting today. In England, Anglican cathedrals often have growing congregations. To be sure, size is not always a sign of missional fidelity, but

⁴⁴ Andrew McGowan, “Rethinking Agape and Eucharist in Early North African Christianity,” *Studia Liturgica* 34 (2004): 165–176.

⁴⁵ Justin, *First Apology* 65–67.

⁴⁶ Kim Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change in Late Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 73.

⁴⁷ Cited by Paul F. Bradshaw, “The Effects of the Coming of Christendom on Early Christian Worship,” in Alan Kreider, ed., *The Origins of Christendom in the West* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 286.

well-attended cathedral services may indicate that large-scale rites of Christian worship that developed in the fourth century are contributing to God's mission today. Other changes characteristic of early Christendom are clearly not fitting. Christians today should not take as a model what some believers were doing in the 420s—"[laying] violent hands on Jews and pagans who are living quietly and attempting nothing disorderly."⁴⁸ It is one of God's good gifts to us that we, in post-Christendom, are unable to coerce belief, belonging, and behavior. Indeed, I suspect that many missional practices that seemed fitting in the fourth and fifth centuries will seem less fitting to us. If we look to the centuries of Gestalt II (early Christendom) as our primary fount of *ressourcement* in the area of mission, we will have come to a dry well. This is why *ressourcement* into mission must go back to the earlier church, to Gestalt I, the Gestalt of pre-Christendom. This Gestalt points to relevant clues and offers gifts. So turning once again to my four observations, let us convert them into hypotheses and test them as ways forward for mission in post-Christendom.

Hypothesis 1. In post-Christendom, the church's witness will not depend on its worship being attractive to outsiders. In early Christendom, the two centuries after Constantine I, the church's growth significantly depended on its worship's appeal to outsiders. Between the fourth and sixth centuries, Christian worship was gradually opened to all, first by the widespread practice of making infants catechumens, and then by universalizing infant baptism. In mature European Christendom societies everyone was expected if not required to attend worship services. So worship lost its relationship to mission. In high Christendom if self-conscious acts of mission happened at all they generally took place in foreign lands, outside of Christendom. Only in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, in late Christendom, did Christian leaders once again ask how worship could be attractive to the outsider. As church attendance plummeted, people who still felt guilty about not going to church at times hunted for a church to which they could return.⁴⁹ In this setting, it was important for worship to be attractive to the visitors.

This approach worked for a time. But today, in post-Christendom, many people have lost connection with the Christian story. No latent sense of guilt haunts their consciousness, and if they like many people

⁴⁸ *Codex Theodosianus* 16.10.24.

⁴⁹ Kreider and Kreider, *Worship and Mission After Christendom*, 219–221.

are searching for spirituality they do not expect that they will find it in a church. Indeed, many people today experience revulsion at the thought of entering a church building. Secularist propaganda makes sense to them, and the thought that religions are intrinsically violent seems a truism. The bad experiences that people have had with Christians give credence to well-attested reports of Christian conflict, manipulation, and abuse. For these reasons, outsiders today are unlikely to come to Christian worship in large numbers. Of course, this should not stop us from being culturally sensitive as we inculturate our worship practices. But *ressourcement* can help us see that in mission today the attractiveness of Christian worship services to outsiders is not the main issue. Our churches can grow numerically, even if no outsiders are present.

Hypothesis 2. In post-Christendom worship Christians glorify God, and God forms them into attractive Christians. As in the early centuries, Christians today praise God for God's actions, which give us a sense of the size and shape of the story of which we are a part, and which make us sensitive to God's inbreaking initiatives now, instilling in us a confident but patient hope for the future. Now, as in early Christianity, the words and rituals of worship burn the teachings and ways of Jesus into our consciousnesses. Our encounters with early Christian texts show us that worship shaped the character, habits, and convictions of the early believers; thus Christian leaders today learn to discern what kind of people our words and liturgical practices are shaping us to be. Liturgical theologians ponder whether our worship forms us to be attractive, question-posing people whom our neighbors notice with fascination. Preachers evaluate their sermons by asking whether they equip the congregants to live confidently in a post-Christendom society. Do their sermons prepare people to discover intriguing equivalents of the early Christians' question-posing approaches to burials, babies, the plague, and nonviolent patience? Pastors ask whether the church's liturgies shape their congregations to be the body of Christ, attractive both in the Christians' gathered life and in their scattered lives as they embody the way of Jesus in their work and relationships.

In many post-Christendom societies today, Christians are encountering a newly articulate secularist, atheist apologetic that is conveyed by billboards and bus-advertisements as well as by argumentative prose. In response, Christian apologists have produced a flurry of apologetic writings that assail the atheists' arguments. In

Why God Won't Go Away, Anglican theologian Alister McGrath indicates one approach that could have a future, if the *ressourcement* of the sort I am proposing takes hold.⁵⁰ McGrath notes that the atheists state as an incontrovertible fact that religion is intrinsically violent; and he counters this by pointing to the Amish. On October 2, 2006, the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, experienced tragedy when a neighbor entered one of their schools, shooting dead five of their young girls before committing suicide. Instead of seeking revenge, the Amish reflexively, immediately, without forethought offered forgiveness to the murderer and his family; and their action attracted immense media attention in many countries.⁵¹ According to McGrath, the behavior of the Amish challenges churches “to bring their ethics into line with those of their founder”; but even more, he argues, it disproves the New Atheist argument that religion is intrinsically violent.⁵² I am grateful for this passage in McGrath’s work, but what if McGrath had been able to do what the early apologists did? What if he had drawn upon stories of Anglicans as well as Amish, of Pentecostals and Baptists and Roman Catholics, to show that when God forgives Christians, God forms them to be forgiving people? What if Christians today, shaped by their worship, had offered McGrath not three paragraphs of embodied argument about the Amish, but thirty-three paragraphs (or pages) presenting embodied argument drawn from many Christian traditions? What if churches today were communities that collect and celebrate the stories of life-giving, Jesus-like, countercultural behavior? An example of what is possible took place recently in Colorado. Chloe Weaver was a twenty-year-old Christian who had volunteered for a year of service in La Jara, Colorado, with Mennonite Voluntary Service. On October 24, 2010, Chloe was cycling with a friend when a pickup truck driven by a sixteen-year-old who was texting struck and killed her. In the court hearing in June 2011, Chloe’s parents astonished everyone by forgiving the driver. According to an account in the local newspaper, her father said to the driver, “I want you to carry on, in some small way, the work Chloe came here to do, to make it a better world.” The reporter cov-

⁵⁰ Alister McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away: Engaging with the New Atheism* (London: SPCK, 2011).

⁵¹ For analysis of the media’s response, and of the Amish who forgave, see Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and David L. Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

⁵² McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away*, 49.

ering the case was amazed: “The Weavers are better people than me. Their religion is not just a Sunday habit; it is as much a part of their daily lives as breathing.”⁵³

When communities tell stories such as these of lives that are rooted in the overarching story of God’s forgiving grace, they engage with freedom in God’s mission. And neighbors recognize that, whether or not they agree with the story, whether or not they want to take part in it, they are facing something that is authentic, solid, and incarnationally true. Some people, who wonder what kind of gospel, and what kind of worship, forms Christians to be question-posing people, will come to believers to investigate. By God’s grace, in due course they will become friends who want to belong to a community that embodies the story.

Hypothesis 3. Rigorous catechesis remains essential. It forms apprentice Christians, preparing them for baptism by teaching, example, and experience so they develop alternative habits and distinctive reflexes. In Christianity’s early centuries, it was not only worship that shaped the believers; it was catechesis that prepared them before they were baptized and participated in the eucharist. Of course, in the centuries after Constantine catechesis atrophied, initially by becoming briefer, focusing on impeccable belief rather than distinctive behavior.⁵⁴ People in fourth-century Jerusalem who heard Cyril’s catechetical sermons were well-prepared to denounce Montanism, but they found no help in responding to materialism. Then, in the high Middle Ages, when infant baptism became the church’s universal practice, catechesis largely disappeared. And in the sixteenth century, when Protestant Reformers vigorously resuscitated catechesis, they largely emphasized its intellectual aspects.

But today, in post-Christendom, catechesis is more necessary than ever as a means of forming apprentice Christians. Never in history have Christians lived in a society in which catechetical apparatuses have been as potent and all-pervasive as they are today. The church’s capacity to form its members is overwhelmed by a mix of internet, television, and advertising. For spiritual and life formation,

⁵³ Julia Wilson, “As I See It: Love, Compassion and Forgiveness Amid the Grief from a Daughter’s Death,” *Valley Courier/Alamosa News*, June 15, 2011; Sheldon C. Good, “Weavers Seek ‘Healing Response’ at Sentencing,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, July 4, 2011.

⁵⁴ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 40–53, 73–79.

who can compete with Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, and Rupert Murdoch? The life work of these creative men swamps the formational capacities of our Sunday services, youth groups, and pre-baptismal/confirmation classes. Pastors today struggle to know what they can offer when prospective believers are beleaguered by hockey and ballet and accelerated academics, and when their parents are overworked, distracted, and commuting, and when the culture industries are catechizing everyone without ceasing. In response, what can the church offer? Three weeks of class sessions? Five?

Ressourcement that draws on the catechetical practices of the Gestalt I Christians suggests that Christians today need not five weeks, but fifty weeks, or a hundred. The early Christians knew that they were offering life to their initiates; they were aware that it took time and group process to reshape the candidates' lives and ways of thinking; and they knew that catechesis required hands-on experience. According to spiritual writer Richard Rohr, the Christians did not "think their way into a new life; they lived their way into a new kind of thinking."⁵⁵ The outstanding example of a religious tradition requiring rigorous catechesis is the Mormon Church, which expects its late teenaged men to do a two-year mission assignment, which has done much to educate the volunteers into a Mormon identity and lifestyle. In addition, the Mormons have "seminaries." These four-year programs for youths aged 14 to 18 meet before school, often at 6 a.m., and teach the students not only the Christian and Mormon scriptures but also "how to navigate high school . . . how to stay good and pure, and 'righteous.'" These "seminaries" have echoes of the third-century church. It is not surprising that the Mormon Church is growing.⁵⁶ The Roman Catholic Church has also actively promoted catechesis. In the 1970s, in a self-conscious application of *ressourcement*, it introduced the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, the RCIA. This has been controversial, but in many dioceses and parishes it has transformed catechesis and brought new commitment to the Christian faith and lifestyle.⁵⁷ In other Christian traditions scattered congregations

⁵⁵ Richard Rohr, OFM, *Simplicity: The Art of Living* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 59.

⁵⁶ John Faherty with William Hermann, "Morning Breaks Early for LDS Students," *The Arizona Republic*, April 20, 2006; <http://www.cultnews.org/group/1057-the-mormon-church/13883-morning-breaks-early-for-lds-students.html>.

⁵⁷ David Yamane, Sarah MacMillen, and Kelly Culver, *Real Stories of Christian Initiation: Lessons for and from the RCIA* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press,

have successfully instituted demanding catechetical programs, modeled on early Christian catechesis.⁵⁸ All of these examples provide evidence for a general rule: groups flourish when they appeal to the ideals of young people, engage them in “high threshold” activities,⁵⁹ and involve them in costly adventure.

Hypothesis 4. The worship of post-Christendom churches takes place in many settings, of which the domestic are increasingly common. As we saw earlier, the Gestalt I churches worshiped in domestic settings. But in early Christendom (Gestalt II) orthodox leaders began to move the locus of Christian worship from houses to public buildings. Constantine I fulminated against groups that met in “private places,” and bishops at times fulminated with him.⁶⁰ It is not hard to understand their objections. Christianity was becoming a public faith (*religio*) and domestic settings were hard to monitor and control. Throughout the fourth century, as resources became available congregations began to leave their houses and to meet in large buildings, at times in newly-built basilicas.⁶¹ In these the aesthetic environment was often glorious, as sights of tapers, mosaics, and vestments, sounds of skillful musicians, and movements of impressive liturgies reached unprecedented excellence and beauty. But there were losses. The size of congregations and buildings made it hard for the worshipers to interact with each other. In the kiss of peace the press of people made it almost impossible for reconciliation to take place. And the exercise of gifts by the members became unwelcome as clergy came to dominate the services. Significantly, in a late fourth-century Syrian church the task of the deacons was to “watch over the people and keep them silent.”⁶² In ironic reversal, in the Christendom centuries it was the heretics and pagans who met in private places and who feared that the authorities might knock on the door.

2006); Jerry Galipeau, ed., *The Impact of the RCIA: Stories, Reflections, Challenges* (Franklin Park, Ill.: World Library Publications, 2008).

⁵⁸ Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2002).

⁵⁹ Arthur Boers, *Living into Focus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Books, 2012, 193–196).

⁶⁰ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3.65; Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change*, 189–200.

⁶¹ Bowes, *Private Worship, Public Values, and Religious Change*, 72–74.

⁶² *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.57.

But today, in many countries, including Canada and the United States, Christians are once again worshipping in homes. The reasons for this are complex. It is not generally because of *ressourcement*, although some people who meet in homes are aware that the early Christians did the same. It is certainly not a result of “patristic fundamentalism.”⁶³ And in many places it is not yet a widespread phenomenon. Many Christians continue to meet in big buildings, in which large congregations participate in worship, ancient or modern, or in which small congregations huddle while worrying whether they can afford to repair the plumbing.

Nevertheless, increasingly Christians today are meeting in small buildings such as homes, shops, and pubs. As Stuart Murray points out, many of these churches have been planted by people who are aware of specific missional needs and opportunities, and who want the church “to connect with people who do not find existing options congenial.”⁶⁴ In post-Christendom there will be lots of variety—house churches, cell churches, table churches, base ecclesial communities, simple churches. As Archbishop Rowan Williams wrote recently, there is today “a mixed economy of church life. . . . There are ways of being church alongside the inherited parochial pattern.”⁶⁵

In post-Christendom Christians are finding a variety of ways of meeting, and an increasing number of believers are meeting in houses, and for good reasons:

- *Economic*: in contrast to church buildings that are expensive to maintain, houses are more affordable, enabling Christians to share money with needy people locally and in many countries instead of repairing the church’s roof.
- *Missional*: houses are liminal spaces, where people who are allergic to Christendom Christianity can come without feeling sick, offended, or threatened.

⁶³ Joan M. Peterson, “House-Churches in Rome,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 23 (1969): 264.

⁶⁴ Stuart Murray, *Planting Churches: A Framework for Practitioners* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2008), 36; Stuart Murray, *Planting Churches in the 21st Century: A Guide for Those Who Want Fresh Perspectives and New Ideas for Creating Congregations* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2010), 44.

⁶⁵ Archbishop’s Council on Mission and Public Affairs, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions in a Changing Context*, second edition (London: Church House Publishing, 2009; New York: Seabury Books, 2010), 26.

- *Pastoral*: people who meet in houses discover the joys of face-to-face Christianity, in which relationships are built and the “one another” (*allēlōn*) life of the New Testament can be realized: “love one another,” “encourage one another,” “greet one another,” “forgive one another,” “bear one another’s burdens.”
- *Liturgical*: the interplay of form and freedom, known to Justin, Tertullian, and the *Apostolic Tradition*, once again emerges⁶⁶; the church becomes “multivoiced” as the gifts of many participants are used, not just those of the ordained celebrant, and the prophetic vocation of the “all,” of the *laos*, emerges (1 Cor. 14:26).⁶⁷
- *The ministry of gastronomy*: people need food. Meals with real food are hospitable and, as missional pastors know, they are often where things “happen.” At table encounters take place and people reveal the secrets of their heart. At table people meet God.

So when the basilica gives way to houses this is not a sign of immaturity or incompleteness. It is an opportunity to take seriously parts of the New Testament that have been silenced in Christendom. Further, it is an opportunity to worship in ways that draw upon the earliest Christian traditions in which there was extemporizing as well as structure (it was only in the fourth century that written liturgical texts came into general use).⁶⁸ Above all, it is an opportunity to participate in God’s mission. To be sure, the “mixed economy” will be mixed, and many Christians will not worship in houses. Those who do meet in houses will face questions: how will they catechize the children and youths who sit at table with them? How will they maintain their sense of belonging to a larger Christian family, including nearby inherited churches and the global church? How will they guard their lives against heresy and accommodation to society? Will God call forth enough gifted leaders to serve as the pastoral “hearth” of each house church? But in post-Christendom’s mixed economy the churches that continue to meet in basilicas will also face questions:

⁶⁶ Justin, *First Apology* 67; Tertullian, *Apology* 39; *Apostolic Tradition* 9.

⁶⁷ Stuart Murray and Sian Murray Williams, *The Power of All: Building a Multi-voiced Church* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2012).

⁶⁸ Allan Bouley, OSB, *From Freedom to Formula: The Evolution of the Eucharistic Prayer from Oral Improvisation to Written Texts* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), 152, 159.

how, in large gatherings, will they give voice to all members? How will they enable testimony in which worshipers report the inbreaking actions of the missional God? In a pressurized society, how will their worship form a body that is a “fictive family” in which members “love one another” and share food and goods? How will their worship equip Christians to live in a way that embodies attractive alternatives to the dominant values of society?

I anticipate that in the coming decades Christians in Canada, Europe, and Australasia will live in societies that are increasingly post-Christendom in character. I expect this also to be true of Christians in the United States, despite the determined efforts of some Americans to construct a neo-Christendom. As we learn to live in post-Christendom, we Christians, I believe, can find renewal as we engage in *ressourcement*. To be sure, we will be sustained by rich resources from the later early church—Gestalt II. We will draw gratefully on creed and canon, and on the theological riches of Basil, Augustine, and other “fathers.” In Gestalt II we may also find missional insights that are useful. For example, when we hear Augustine speaking of the church as an “inn” in which sinners and sinned-against people can experience God’s healing, we will know that this can be missionally as well as pastorally profound.⁶⁹ When we watch the Jerusalem Christians of the late fourth century practicing ambulatory, “stational” worship, we will think of ways that Christians in pluralist societies can give public demonstration to their faith.⁷⁰ Further, when Christians in baptistic traditions encounter well-ordered Gestalt II models of confirmation, they may find inspiration to introduce solid catechesis for youths and adults in their churches who have been baptized with minimal teaching.

However, as I have argued in this paper, I suspect that in many areas—especially in mission—we will learn more from Gestalt I than from Gestalt II. This is not because we will agree with everything the earlier Christians did. Rather, it will be because they, living before Christendom, are closest to “the original sources of [our] own life.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Sermo* 131.6.

⁷⁰ Lester Ruth, Carrie Steenwyk, and John D. Witvliet, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: Worship in Fourth-Century Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010).

⁷¹ Dulles, “Tradition and Creativity in Theology,” 23.

Further, it will be because we will find intriguing parallels between their situation in pre-Christendom and ours in post-Christendom. Most of all, we will learn from the Gestalt I Christians because they ask us questions that stir our imaginations and suggest new possibilities. So let us engage in *ressourcement*, appropriating the best of ancient Christianity as a fitting way to engage in God's mission with buoyancy and hope.

