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The importance of early Christian thought for theology today. The church in the world

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Abstract

Early Christianity is not only a source of historical interest, it also challenges the systematic theology and Christian ethics of today. Early Christians saw themselves as a community of life with the Eucharist at its centre. Because they participated in eternal life, they were willing to sacrifice their earthly lives in times of persecution and in the care for those who were in mortal danger. As a community of life, they rejected killing any human being, and thus also rejected abortion and military service. They were not an alternative community marked by their diet, dress or emancipation. In such issues they adapted to their environment. They made a difference by their love for those who were in need and by their faithfulness to Christ – though their message was sometimes better than their praxis.

Keywords

Early Christianity; contextuality; eternal life; Christian ethics.

1. Introduction

Early Christian thought has for a long time only been a matter of historical interest. Recently, theologians have become more aware of its significance for the present systematic theological discourse (cf. Bakker 2005). There are three reasons why the early church may be important for theological thought today:

Early Christianity is the beginning of the Christian tradition. In a scholarly discourse, criteria are required for a critical investigation of sound theology. If these are lacking, theology can only follow the course of church culture uncritically, either in line with dominant culture or opposing it. The question must be asked: what is true, genuine Christian thought? Resourcing is one of the main tools in answering this question. Of course,

Scripture is the first source for critical Christian theology. However, for the interpretation of Scripture, resourcing to the beginnings of Christian hermeneutics is also of eminent importance. For this the early church cannot be underestimated. It is the first layer in the history of the church as the interpreting community of Scripture, in time and culture closest to the canon, which was consolidated exactly in that time. When the Reformation criticised contemporary dominant theology and church leadership, they did so by returning to the sources, *ad fontes*, not only the Bible, but also the church fathers. The slogan *ecclesia quia reformata semper reformanda* does not mean that the church has to adapt continually to changing culture (for positions, see Koffeman 2015). This adaptation occurs automatically, as the church is part of culture. It rather means that again and again theology must return critically to the sources in order to check the course of the church through history. Is she still on the right track, faithful to her identity?

A second reason for paying special attention to early Christianity, is that it was a time when Christianity was a minority in a multicultural society. This is where the church finds itself today in many places. After more than thousand years of Christian political dominance and propagation of Christianity by colonial powers, the church is now only one of many stakeholders in the societal debate, and in many countries not even an important stakeholder. After seventeen centuries of dominance, Church leaders and theologians are not accustomed to this new position. Study of the early church can be very helpful for a new understanding of Christian theology and a repositioning of church leadership. Early Christian theologians and church leadership knew how to cope with being a minority.

- In other regions, Christianity is the religion of the majority. However, it is rather a field of diverse and often competing Christian traditions. How to deal with this diversity is the subject of a following article. More important is that precisely in these regions Christianity is confronted with suffering and exploitation, and even more confronting: both as perpetrators and as victims. Early Christianity had a long experience with suffering, exploitation and oppression. Exploring its thought can be a good contribution to the current debate, especially as the church explicitly was on the side of the victims.

Thirdly, life and thought of early Christianity was very different from that of today. The present theological discourse has its own dominant topics, often in the margins of theology, such as particular ethical issues or answers to scientific developments. Exposed to totally different debates and positions abandoned long ago, provides new challenges, opens pathways to fresh understanding of the Christian message, and delivers theology from always moving along the same boring tracks.

2. A community of life

Early Christians perceived themselves as a community of eternal life in Christ. They were incorporated into Him by baptism. Their life is his life and *because He is in heaven their identity is designated by heaven*. Our *politeuma* is in heaven, writes Paul (Phil 3:20). Your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3). This is celebrated in the Eucharist, which is the medicine for immortality, *pharmakon athanasias* (Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 20, 2). Living in Christ also means dying to the world. In baptism Christians are buried with Christ in his death (Rom 6:4). He who is in Christ is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come (2 Cor 5:17).

From the very beginning, Christians proclaimed a strong contrast between their own community and the world around them. The foundation of this was their identity in Christ who died to this world. This becomes visible in ethics. "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:1). *Early Christianity stressed this moral change, as the anonymous author of* "To Diognetus" *writes*:

> They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.

> They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evilly spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers (To Diognetus 5,5–16).

Because early Christians believed they have eternal life, they did not fear death. Sometimes they even eagerly accepted martyrdom, like Ignatius (see esp. Ignatius, *To the Romans* 5; Bakker 2005:55–74). This was, however, a matter of debate: when martyrdom becomes a blessing, is it then still martyrdom? The other option is more dominant: we persevere suffering with Christ in his agony, since we know about his victory over death (Klijn 1966:39–47; Bakker 2005:75–79).

Sharing in suffering is a particular characteristic of early Christianity. They share the suffering of Christ (Klijn 1966:39f), but also the suffering of the diseased who were excluded from society, such as lepers and disabled children. They did not fear contamination during an epidemic when the elite of the city and even the most famous medical doctor fled (Kruger 2017:27f; Horstmanshoff 1979:65). In the light of eternal life, it is better do die while sharing in suffering, than to leave the sufferers to their death, thus denying your trust in the Lord who makes the dead alive.

This care for the diseased is not mere compassion. It is compassion which is rooted in the zest for life. Death is not the last victory over everyone's life. It may be the last enemy (I Cor 15:26), but its last victory is turned into a final defeat (I Cor 15:54f). Christ is victorious over death and nothing can separate us from his love, not even death (Rom 8:38f).

This is celebrated in the Eucharist. The Church commemorates the death of the Lord, but she does so on the day of his resurrection. The celebration of the Eucharist is the core of her life. Every thought about Christian life in the first centuries must begin with the Eucharist. It is communion with Christ. It is communion with his resurrection. It is receiving and sustaining eternal life. Therefore, the celebration of the Eucharist is done with the greatest care for this precious bread. In the *Apostolic Constitutions,* even

the material of the fans that the deacons used for driving away insects is described (*Apostolic Constitutions* 8,12) – and the same care is expressed in prayers and formulas. When celebrating the holy communion, arbitrary words used by the priest were not appropriate; only the words that have been sanctioned by the church of all places and times.

The Eucharist is not a matter of the local church. It is the communion of all Christians all over the world and also with those who preceded us to the glory of Christ. "As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so let thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom" (*Didache* 9,4). It is one body as it is one Lord and one God through one Spirit.

The core of Christian life is the Eucharist. It is celebrating life, everlasting, eternal life. And the whole Christian presence in the world emanates from this event. That is why they care for those in life-threatening situations, the diseased and the poor; for those assailed by the power of death, widows and orphans (Bakker 2005:34). They do not fear, for they share in the victory over death in the resurrection of Christ.

3. No participation in death

Christianity is a communion of life. Therefore, Christians will not participate in killing (Sider 2012). The only relation Christians have with death is overcoming death, and thus never causing death. They were absolutely consistent in this: no killing is allowed, under no circumstances. This is about life from its very beginning to its ultimate end. They rejected abortion, for abortion is murder (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 9,7). The *Apostolic Tradition* (16, 10) excludes judges, someone who wears the purple, who is authorized to sentence to death, from even becoming a catechumen. You cannot become a member of the community of eternal life, if you have to consider sentencing someone to death.

Most conspicuous is the attitude of early Christians towards the armed forces. "Christ wants his disciples to be pacifists", writes Origen (*Commentary in Matthew* 102). And the *Apostolic Tradition* (16, 11) orders that no one who wants to be a soldier can become a catechumen. When somebody is in the army and converts to the Christian faith, he should

refuse to kill even if this could cause his own death for insubordination. Tertullian tells a moving story of a soldier who even refused the chaplet of victory, which was bestowed on his company. He was sentenced to death and will receive a greater glory (*On the chaplet* 1). Tertullian says: "Is the laurel of the triumph made of leaves, or of corpses? Is it adorned with ribbons, or with tombs? Is it bedewed with ointments, or with the tears of wives and mothers?" (*On the chaplet* 12).

While the care of the sick is still part of today's Christian ethics, the opinion about killing is very diverse. On the one hand there are the prolife activists who, like Hippolytus, claim that abortion is murder. They are, however, often the same people who advocate a strong army and even propagate the death penalty. On the other hand, those who are pacifists, often also claim the freedom of women to decide over their unborn child. It is the strange, notorious, contradiction that those who oppose abortion and euthanasia call for weapons and the death penalty, while those who are against weapons accept killing unborn or unendurable life.

These debates are often fierce and the inconsistencies in thought are driven by emotional arguments of human fear, hedonism, and power. No progress can be expected in this field. It is a challenge to again understand what moved early Christians to their attitude towards killing. Care for the ill, care for the unborn and the disabled life, refusal to take up arms, all these aspects stem from the same root: the celebration of eternal life in Christ in the Eucharist. They did not deal with ethical issues separately. Their ethics were eucharistic life and as Christ cannot be divided, so ethical issues cannot be separated – and any issue is directed to life, most of all the life of those who are in danger of death.

What would it mean for the church in South-Africa if she would understand herself again as a eucharistic community of life? What would it imply for Christian theology if the faculties would again make the Eucharist, as the communion with Christ, the core of their research? It will have an enormous impact on church and theology. Eucharistic life is not just something to think about, or a topic to discuss. It is a way of living. Christian faith, says Hilary, is not a matter of discussion, but a matter of celebrating and living. Theology, he says, is only needed to refute those who corrupt Christian faith and thus Christian life, (Hilary, *On the Trinity* 2,2),

and I would add, because they do not understand what a sacramental life is. They do not understand what it means to be baptized: in baptism the old identity, as an identity of death, is buried with Christ in his death, and we are resurrected to a new identity of life in Him. We celebrate this eternal life in the eucharistic communion with Him.

4. Totally different from mainstream society

The Christian community which celebrated life was totally different from the dominant culture and society. The classic slogan, bread and games, *panis et circenses*, is characteristic indeed of much of the culture of the Roman empire. Sex can be added to these (see Goodman 2008:273–292). Bread comes first. Every politician knows that economic issues must be high on the political agenda. If people have bread they will not revolt. And Roman emperors provided for this. Economic prosperity was a solid basis for political stability.

The importance of games is still visible today in the ruins of impressive amphitheatres such as the Colosseum in Rome. Thousands of people attended chariot races and gladiator contests everywhere in the empire. These were a display of power and violence. The public applauded when a gladiator killed his opponent. They shouted with joy when a lion killed a person sentenced to death, or one who was merely a prisoner of war. It was part of a mentality of violence and disregard for human dignity, a mentality of prostitution and promiscuity, of corruption and deceit. This was the world which the apostle describes:

> You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator (Col 3:7–10)

Next to the amphitheatres the triumph arches of the victorious emperor arose. They were the crown of a society built on violence (Goodman 2008:317–323). The glorious Roman legions marched on the highways from England to Persia and their impressive power was the peace of Rome.

They were awarded with chaplets and after their service for the glory of the Empire was fulfilled, they received land in one of the colonies established for their retired days

The aspect of cities was dominated by temples, temples of any kind. The great cultural centres had the most wonderful temples, such as the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. Religious worship was not something apart from daily life as it often is in modern life. It was an integral part of imperial life and power. The gods were the gods of the empire and they were the guarantors of prosperity and victory. Worshipping Artemis was worshipping the success of the hunt, the drive for gain. In late antiquity, legionaries and emperors turned to the worship of the mysterious Mithras, the god of the soldiers (Vermaseren 1959).

These were two worlds – Christianity and the world of antiquity. Nevertheless, it was in this world that Christians lived. Both laid claim to the totality of life, and thus soon conflicts arose. Christians rejected all aspects which were the truss of the empire. They opposed sexual licentiousness, rejected violence, deprecated the games, and refused to worship the gods of the empire. They preferred the bread from heaven to the bread of prosperity.

The response of the dominant society was harsh. This already began with the reaction to Jesus, soon followed by persecution of his followers. They were imprisoned and put to death and were the scapegoat for any disaster. "If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightaway the cry is, 'Away with the Christians to the lion!'" (Tertullianus, *Apologist* 40). It was not always so severe; the persecution came and went. However, the imperial Roman culture was as fundamentally opposed to Christianity as Christianity was to Roman culture.

When comparing twenty-first century global culture with the Roman-Hellenistic culture of the first centuries AD, there is no fundamental difference. Bread still comes first of all. "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral" (Brecht 2004:67) is still true. And "bread" is not only the basic necessity of life, it can also refer to an abundantly prosperous life. Mammon is a mighty god and a god who is never satisfied.

Other aspects of classic culture are also characteristic of modern cities. Sport stadiums are quite as impressive as the old amphitheatres. Thousands of people all over the world fill the stands, applauding the victory of their champion and enjoying the defeat of the opponent. Of course, it is not a fight to the death like in antiquity, but in sport glory and defeat are almost as powerful as life and death. The extremely violent character of the ancient amphitheatre has been transferred to the private living room. As the crowds watched the death of defeated gladiators and people torn to pieces by lions, today young people watch the death of many and the destruction of cities on the screen, and they eagerly participate in this virtual reality. Twenty-first century people still enjoy watching violence and death. Egoism, brutality, intimidation, exploitation – these are just as common in today's society as in the Roman-Hellenistic culture of the early Christians. Certainly, nuances differ, but the basic attitude of society is similar. The challenge for theology is to answer the question whether Christian life today is just as different from the dominant society as in antiquity? How do Christians deal with bread, sport and games? What are the ideological structures which replace the old civil religion? Or is Christianity part of civil religion, one of the pillars of dominant violent society? Is it therefore so difficult to identify the gods of this world and their temples?

5. Christians' reaction

Christians were the light of the world. They brought light for those in the dark of illness and isolation. By doing so they also unmasked the darkness of the culture in which they lived (Van de Beek 2001:9–17). The darkness did not grasp the light (Jn 1:5) but tried to extinguish it. Christians were continually under pressure through the ongoing opposition to their proclamation of life. How did Christians react to this opposition?

Firstly, we should not idealise early Christianity. Many Christians bowed under the pressure of their opponents and surrendered. The letter to the Hebrews warns not to neglect the meetings of the congregation (Hebr. 10:25), that means to celebrate the Eucharist as the source of life. The sermon of II Clement complains that the hearers do not make the word reality in their lives. Consequently, the Christians are blamed:

> When they see, that not only do we not love those who hate, but that we do not even love those who love, they laugh us to scorn, and the name is blasphemed (*II Clement* 13,3).

There were many *lapsi* during the persecutions, and many bribed officials to receive a declaration that they had brought offerings to the gods and the emperor (the *libellatici*).

The church was not only under pressure in times of persecution, but even more so in times of relief. Christians lived unencumbered in Rome and Carthage about the year 200. They were accepted in society, and they accepted society (Bakker 2005:79–82). This led to extreme behaviour in Rome. Christians committed adultery, and when women became pregnant, they committed abortion, so adding murder to prostitution, as the contemporary Hippolytus writes (*Refutation* 9,7). And the bishop accepted everything, just proclaiming forgiveness for any sin without repentance or penitence. So, we should not idealize early Christianity.

On the other hand, we should not think that this was normal behaviour among Christians. If their care for the poor and the sick had not been so conspicuous in society, their claims would have been futile (cf. Meijering 2004:193). Opponents hardly made use of the moral weakness of Christians. Indeed, the bishop of Rome was reprimanded by his contemporary colleagues for his laxity. It was not even accepted in his own diocese and, totally against the ecclesiastic custom of that time, they voted for a counter-bishop who faithfully kept to Christian life. It was this counter-bishop who was accepted by the church as one of her saints, saint Hippolytus. Besides the *lapsi* and *libellatici,* there were the innumerable faithful who gave their lives on behalf of their Lord, singing about eternal glory and praying for their persecutors. The same chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, where the author warns against absence from the meetings, tells about people who joyfully accepted the confiscation of their goods (Hebr. 10:34). They did not react to violence and injustice with counter-violence and anger. They followed their Lord, who "when they hurled their insults at him, did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1Petr 2:23).

Even when Christians did not persevere and adjusted themselves to the opponents, it does not mean that this was considered as normal Christian

behaviour. When people do not keep to the standards, it does not mean that the standards are no longer valid. Even the perverse women in Rome went to the bishop after sinning and asked for forgiveness. In early third century Christian Rome, sinners even asked to be baptized a second time so that their sins would be washed away again, and the bishop complied (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 9,7). However, the whole church declared that forgiveness should not be granted as easily as the bishop of Rome did.

Adaptation to circumstances, devaluation of standards, cheap grace – these are all things noticeable in 21st century Christianity. Most of all, a loss of motivation and seriousness is evident. Reading the history and the writings of early Christianity challenges us: how we deal with this devaluation of Christian life? How do we live as Christians today without relapsing into mere conservatism? Any call for serious Christian life is apt to be claimed by conservatism. In order to avoid this, it should be clear that no aspect can be dealt with in isolation. Christian life is not a set of rules. It is a life in Christ, and Christ is one. One cannot advocate strict rules of sexual morality like the early Christians did without sharing their view on bearing arms. We should also not use side issues such as food or clothing as indications of identity. Clothes were worn by Christians in such a way to best express their identity. Even the discourse on clothing follows that pattern (Daniel-Hughes 2011:3). The letter to Diognetus (5,4) explicitly states that Christians conform to the customs of their social context. Tertullian argues that new fashions should not be rejected (*On the pallium*). Culture always changes (*On the pallium; On the veil of virgins*). Christian identity is not enshrined in clothes, food or social emancipation, but in their willingness to serve all people because they follow their Lord. Clothes are Christian clothes if worn by Christians! "Joy, Mantle, and exult! A better philosophy has now deigned to honour you, ever since you have begun to be a Christian's vesture!" (Tertullian, *On the pallium* 6). That does not imply that everything was allowed. Regarding the way women dress, Tertullian argues that women should be decently and soberly clothed (*On the apparel of women*; cf. 1 Tim 2:9f; 1 Petr 3:3f), and that virgins should be veiled (*On the veil of virgins*). Actually, he follows his North-African patriarchal context when he speaks about women. He is even more strict regarding virgins. Thus the relative value of custom can go either way: more strict or more liberal. Tertullian may be strict regarding women, but

generally the position of women was much better in early Christianity than among the pagans (Kruger 2017:31–39)

6. The debate of defence

Christian behaviour is most importantly reflected in their reaction to culture and persecution. Any word of defence is made insubstantial if it is not supported by a way of life. Nevertheless, the words of Christian apologists, supported by their Christian lifestyle, formed a strong defence. Four approaches can be distinguished in Christian apologetics in the early church.

a. The most direct defence is a call on the government for a just use of the law. The plea that Christians do not wrong others, nor transgress against the government is supported by reference to the unjust action towards Christians (Bakker 2005:28–34). The apologies by Tertullian and Athenagoras (*A plea for the Christians*) bear this character.

b. Another approach is opening a debate with contemporary philosophy. Justin the Martyr (*Apology* I and II) is the most famous example of this. He tries to convince his readers by claiming that the most enlightened pagan philosophers are not far from Christianity. They too rejected the Homerian pantheon with its all too human-like gods and goddesses. The great Greek philosophers knew about the one ultimate Good and the one primordial cause of being. They were not far from the Christian confession of the one God. When Christians are persecuted for their perseverance in truth, they do not only share the perseverance of their Lord, but also that of the great Socrates, who because of his love for truth can even be called a Christian (Justinus Martyr, *Apology* II,14; cf. *Apology* I,5; I,46; II,10). Plato, too, had good insights because he knew of a creator (Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* III,25,5; see Meijering 1995:21–23; 2000; Meijering 2001a:89–94, 110–114; 2004:187). In this way, the apologists tried to depict common pagans as illiterate and even overwhelmed by their own bright philosophers, who were closer to the Christians than to their dumb persecutors.

c. One of the most famous responses to pagan philosophy is Origen's reaction to Celsus' *The True Logos*. Celsus accuses Christians of all kinds of wrongs, often making them seem ridiculous. Origen's answer is clinical.

He analyses Celsus' arguments and refutes these, actually quite easily due to the caricatures Celsus often makes of Christians.

d. A fourth approach is to depict the pagan philosophers themselves as stupid. Athanasius, in his *Against the heathen*, depicts them as people who dive into muddy water and do not see clearly what they are speaking about. The more efforts they make, the muddier the water becomes (*Against the heathen* 8,3).

Athanasius' approach is the most confident. However, it would be a mistake to consider Justin's argumentation as bowing to Greek philosophy. One can only integrate an opponent to such an extent when one is convinced, he cannot harm you. It is what Eginhard Meijering (2004:177) called "The self-confident defence".

7. Adaptation to culture

Christians did not oppose the culture in which they lived as such. They only rejected the religious claims of the Roman government and the lifestyle of competition, greed, power and violence. For the rest they adapted to their context. They were exhorted to keep to their daily task (1 Thess 4:11). They were Jews to the Jews and Greeks to the Greeks, dependent on the place where they lived. Tertullian's view regarding women fits into the North-African context. One should not assume that Christian life is about issues of emancipation. On the other hand, women in Asia also had high positions in the church, such as Macrina who was called "the Teacher" (*magistra*) by the famous theologian Gregory of Nyssa (*On the soul and the resurrection*).

In this perspective it is remarkable what early Christians did *not* oppose. They accepted slavery (Eph 6:5; Col 3:22;Tit 2:9). They accepted the generally subordinate position of women (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; 1 Petr 3:1). They did not strive for social change, because earthly society is only a place where they were resident aliens. Their home was in heaven and therefore they accepted societal structures for the time being – and earthly time is always for the time being. They also accepted the government as it was (Rom 13:1–7; Tit 2:3). There is not even a sign of revolutionary ideas in early Christianity. They rather prayed for the government (1 Tim 2:2), despite the government's brutal repression as in the time of Claudius. It is better

to have an oppressive regime than the hardship of revolution and civil war. They were confronted with the example of the Jewish war and they rejected it. They did so, not only because of the hardship for people during and after a revolution, or even more as a result of a failed war of liberation, but also because they were convinced that change of earthly society is not the aim of Christians. Any earthly society is a society which belongs to this world and Christians belong to another world, to eternal life which is presently hidden in God. One government can be relatively better than another but compared to the Kingdom of God they are all the same. Therefore, they prayed for a peaceful life under the existing government. Even when they were challenged by Celsus to participate in government because Christians had so much criticism on societal life, the invitation was rejected by Origen. Christians do not use worldly power but the power of prayer. This is better for society than serving the emperor in his army (*Against Celsus* 8,73).

The way early Christians dealt with societal issues is a huge challenge for the present debate, and even more: for the real life of Christians today. It is a challenge for those who are suffering new forms of exploitation and slavery. It is even more a challenge for those who support oppressing societal systems. They cannot use early Christian patience as an argument against opposition by the oppressed. They have to take to heart the strong rejection of exploitation, like the apostle James furiously expresses in his letter, in line with the prophets of the Old Testament. Reading early Christian writings is a real challenge in this perspective – as is reading the Bible, which is more than some fine texts which can be used for the daily reading of a spiritual booklet.

8. Not only spiritual life

When Christians are not interested in societal change, are they not turning their back on society and practical life? Is it only about spiritual life and souls who will be saved? Early Christians would not have recognized themselves in this picture. They understood their life as material as matter can be, and as bodily as bodies can be. The church is the body of Christ. This is the one body which shares the eucharistic bread. This is not only a spiritual body but the body which has sexual intercourse. Because bodies of Christians are part of the body of Him who gave his body in faithfulness

to those whom He loved, Christians cannot be unfaithful to their partners and share their bodies with prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15). As Christ offered his body for the well-being and life of the Christians, Christians offer their body and all their body can do on behalf of their partners (Eph 5:28).

Christian life is bodily life. Therefore, they baptize new-born children, as Cyprian argues. These children belong to the church for they were born in the church of which their mothers were part (Cyprianus, Letter to Fidus, ep. 58,2). The body of a mother is the bodily presence of the body of Christ and so is the child which grows in her womb. For Cyprian the Christian community is as bodily as a pregnant mother, and as material as the food he gave to the refugees in his manor during the persecution, and as bodily as he gave his body to death in the same persecution in faithfulness to his Saviour.

The body is a holy gift of the holy Creator of life. Therefore, Christians do not make distinctions between human beings, depending on nationality, culture, race or gender. They do not make distinctions between perfect and disabled bodies. Nobody is perfect in himself or herself, and every human body is perfect as it is loved by God, whatever others may think about it.

9. Conclusion

Early Christian discourse on true Christian life is totally different from that of the twenty-first century. We can easily put it aside as irrelevant because it belongs to past times. It will be more fruitful for the present church and society to take on the challenge of being confronted with original Christian thought and life (Bakker 2005:217–220).

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