

FIRST RESPONSE TO THE LAING LECTURE 1994

MEIC PEARSE

I am very grateful to Alan Kreider for crystallising a lot of thoughts for us concerning the early church. I hope he does speak for all of us when he says that nobody would want to practise naked baptism. My mind immediately shot to a pamphlet published by Daniel Featley in the mid-seventeenth century concerning the early English Baptists, in which they were portrayed as doing precisely that. It was a libel, of course!

Something else that he mentioned excited me, and again rang bells with me about some of the early English Baptists. He said that in the evidence he's found in the early church, there wasn't simply one preacher speaking at great length to everybody, but the teaching was a shared experience—a number of people would take part in a meeting. That's precisely what happened in Thomas Lambe's church in Bell Alley, Coleman Street, London, in the 1640s. It was gloriously chaotic in that fashion. In a sense that's good, because it shows that what was happening in the early church and what was happening in some revivalist movements—the early days of Christian movements before they crystallise and grow old—is similar: the church is a body of people, and it expresses its life together. There isn't someone at the front being the church *for us*, in a way which automatically relegates the rest of us to a kind of second tier; we collectively are the body of Christ.

The main things that struck me about what Alan shared was concerning the nature of the early church's witness. The text of his lecture includes a quote from Minucius Felix: 'Beauty of life . . . causes strangers to join the ranks . . . We do not talk about great things; we live them' (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 31.7; 38.5).

Now, of course, it's not that we shouldn't talk about great things. In the existentialist society in which we live, the last thing we want to do is to start down-playing doctrine, but the early church in its evangelism was actually practical; it did involve following Jesus practically, not simply, and not only, preaching. Perhaps under conditions of persecution, which came in immediately after the apostolic period, that was necessary because it wasn't possible publicly to go out and preach in the street, as it were. The church challenged and undermined the social order and the political institutions of the Roman empire, *not* by telling society to reform, *not* by trying to get governments to do X, Y, or Z, but by being what it was, by *being* a challenge, not by speaking one. Alan also highlighted the way that friendship evangelism, then as now, is the

most productive form of bringing people to Christ. Recent surveys have shown that that is still the case—individual Christians earning the right to be heard.

I was encouraged by his emphasis on the fact that the pagans weren't allowed in through the door into a Christian worship service until they were ready to submit to becoming catechumens for baptism. This illustrates that entry into the early church involved two things: submitting to Christian teaching—becoming catechumens, addressing their minds—and submitting to the Christian lifestyle. That does challenge where we are today. It challenges the assumption that conversion is simply an emotional experience; conversion addressed the mind, the heart, the character and the lifestyle. There were no pagans in the church—they simply weren't there. The church was a *believer's* church; it was in that sense pure. The unbeliever had the choice of conversion or of staying out.

Another thing that struck me was the point that the second century catechumenate was for people very much from raw paganism, whereas in the pages of the New Testament most of the converts have at least some kind of background in Judaism or as God-fearers. Perhaps baptism classes in some Baptist churches, or commitment classes in some house-churches, are less worthy of being made fun of than some of us have been wont to do.

Finally, Alan's comment about the final detoxification of people after a process of coming into the church shows that the early church was rather more eager to rescue new Christians from the thinking and the practices of their society, than we are. I would suggest that perhaps our lack of willingness to do that is because we are still in the backwater of the Christendom mentality; somehow we still are wedded to the idea that our society, with all its immoralities, is nevertheless in some sense 'Christian', and it is not.