

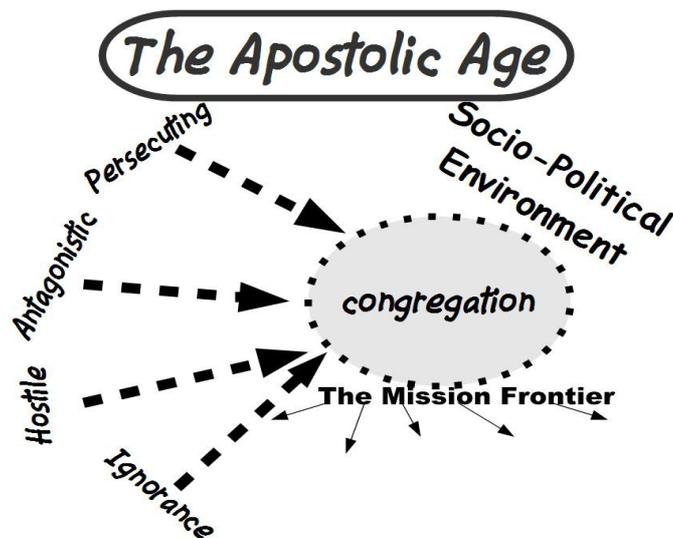
Ages of the Church

Loren Mead has analysed the different ways the Church operated in society through the ages, and has identified three discrete ages of the Church¹:

1. The Apostolic Age — the first, nearly, 400 years:
2. The Christendom Age — about 400 to mid 1990s — and still clung to for dear life:
3. The Emerging Age — now:

The Apostolic Age

Diagrammatically², this is shown as:



For its first, nearly 400 years of existence, the Church could not meet openly — so no buildings were built. To become a Christian meant you had sentenced yourself to execution by the Romans. So, to become a Christian one *had to have a sure, living faith* — otherwise the risk was too great. History tells us that all the Apostles were martyred. So there were no church-adherents / hangers-on, who had once been *christened* but only appeared occasionally — perhaps only Easter and Christmas. In this time the persecutions of Emperors Diocletian and Nero took on epic proportions³. Yet the church was lively and grew exponentially. When Constantine became Emperor he saw, pragmatically, that the continued, systematic persecution of Christians was not economically viable⁴, and declared Christianity as Rome's official religion. The weight of evidence is that Constantine never himself became a convert. He was possibly baptised on his death bed (without his knowledge)⁵.

1 See his books *The Once and Future Church* and *Challenges for the Once and Future Church*.

2 The source for these diagrams (slightly modified) is Loren Mead's *The Once and Future Church*.

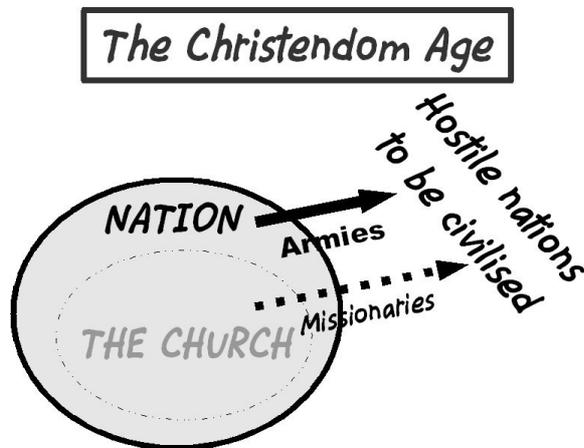
3 Interpreters — notably contemporary ones — saw these emperors in turn as 'The Beast' whose number is 666 of Revelation 13:18. Through the ages others have seen Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, and whoever may be in fashion to dislike as the Beast.

4 I have lived through a similar dynamic in South Africa where State Presidents PW Botha and FW de Klerk saw that apartheid could not be supported any longer.

5 Do not believe all you read in Dan Brown's novels — they are full of conspiracy theories — few facts.

The Christendom Age

Shown diagrammatically as:



The Christian churches, after the Emperor Constantine recognised Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire (313AD), have been closely associated with the Empire (whichever one — Roman, Byzantine, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Napoleonic, British etc.). The expansion of the church was through missionaries following the conquering armies as they gained territory for the Empire. It was assumed because one was a citizen of the Empire that one was a Christian.

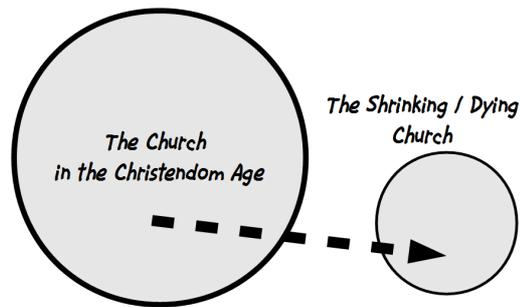
The identity of being a Christian because of being a citizen persists in many people's minds — marked by a right of passage or initiation misnamed '*christening*' — and is shown in census figures. In a recent census in South Africa 79.8% of the population claimed to be Christian. In reality, perhaps 80+% of those have been '*christened*' or baptised⁶ but have seldom, if ever, set foot inside a church since then.

In this Christendom Age there was no cost associated with being a Christian. In the Apostolic Age that preceded it, if you were a Christian there was a good chance of being martyred — a big cost to pay! Also, there was no need or expectation that anybody needed to grow in relationship with, or knowledge of, the Lord. Theology — having been the domain of all in the Apostolic Age, and having been intimately associated with spirituality — became, in the Christendom Age, the domain of the Church and professional, academic theologians⁷. It became a period of strict orthodoxy: "This is the Church's teaching (dogma or doctrine). Believe and obey unquestioningly." From this sort of dogmatic position such dubious teaching as "Buy a candle and light them to pay / pray for one's dead to get through purgatory to heaven" or "The Pope is infallible" arose. Scripture says, including popes: "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" Romans 3:23 ESV.

In the Christendom Age '*the Church*' came to mean the fancy building down the road, not '*The Body of Christ*.' Further, many of these buildings are now derelict because as members die no new members are introduced to share the financial load and they implode:

6 The church-going ones of these are severely affronted and insulted when a Pentecostal asks them, "Are you saved, brother?" Their response is, "I have always been a member of my denomination all my life. There is no need to make a commitment." I recently heard a priest say exactly this from a pulpit after most of his adult life in ministry, and being the son of a bishop.

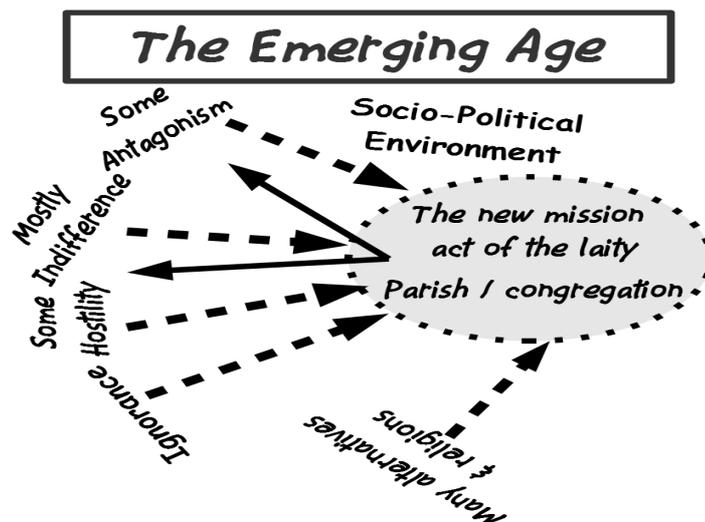
7 It became yet another academic discipline, often without any reference to a lived faith. By being 'outside' Christian faith, theologians could be dispassionate observers. During my studies I attended a tutorial class in Systematic Theology. The professor introduced himself, "My naam is van Niekerk — verstaan 'Van Nie Kerk'?" = "my name is van Niekerk — understand 'Of No Church'?"



A Baptist theologian, John Darby in the mid 19th century, observed the way the Church was so comfortable and developed a theology called Darbyism / dispensationalism — which says God works in different dispensations — not based on Scripture. To get the Early Church going God gave the Holy Spirit, but has now removed him. Many — particularly some Anglican bishops — think they understand how to 'do' and 'be' Church — 'the Church — as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.' Wrong — they have forgotten all they learnt in Church history. The Desert Fathers, including St. Benedict — escaped from the Church at the end of the Apostolic Age as they objected to its seeming lack of life, and its 'getting organised'. Many, including some bishops, worship 'Father, Son and holy tradition!'

The Emerging Age

In diagram form:



The Christendom model has been taking strain for some time. First modernism⁸, then post-modernism⁹, provided challenges, with their increasing secularisation of society.

The Christendom model no longer applies, although it still predominates. Armies no longer go out to convert the heathens, so missionary work has lost its focus, and has become increasingly difficult, as most missionaries (so-called) merely ran parochial churches, but in a different cultural setting.

Church and State became increasingly distanced (in Christian¹⁰ — but not Muslim / Hindu

8 Marked by the ascendancy of the *mind*, and the adoption of an analytical, scientific method. As the existence of God cannot be scientifically proven it is implicitly disproved.

9 Largely syncretism, blending various religious teachings together indiscriminately under the heading of Christianity. It is marked by a denial of sin / evil, a contempt for law (of the land and of Moses), and verges on the heretical position of universalism — everyone will land in heaven no matter what. Who needs a Saviour? Mohammed said Jesus was a great prophet. Post-modernism seems to agree. But, Jesus *is* God, is he not?

10 This religious tolerance is written into the USA Constitution, and is in the new South African Constitution. Effectively it means no school-teacher can teach about Jesus Christ unless she wants a vicious backlash.

— states) under the slogan of “Religious Toleration for all”, often enshrined in Constitutions, which merely provides a platform for militant Islam to attack any Christian teaching, especially in schools.

But the Church did not recognise — or respond creatively to — the changing environment. Most of those in ministry were so deeply immersed in the values and models of ministry of the Christendom Age — set in their ways — that they could not respond, even if they saw the need¹¹. Thus, an ageing — therefore dying — congregation has financial issues. The problem is analysed as being '*people must give more*' with huge emphasis on tithing, instead of, '*how can we fill the church with younger, economically active new Christians?*'

Jesus taught the apostles — and therefore the Church (Matthew 28:18-20) –

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This teaching was seen, in the Apostolic Age to mean that the duty — and normal behaviour in loving one's neighbour — of every Christian became to evangelise people they encountered in their daily walk, leading them to conversion, and then — after baptism — teaching them, making them into disciples (followers) — sanctification (Rom 6:22). If evangelism is preached the typical reaction of people is to invite Christians from other churches to 'Come to my church!' = in-drag, not outreach. The same teaching in the Christendom Age focussed on the words 'all nations' and a complex, theology of mission was developed. So personal evangelism was not taught, and often actively discouraged¹², and the Church focussed its attention on raising funds to support missionaries in various countries — only allocating to that purpose what was surplus to paying clergy and maintaining the church buildings.

In the Emerging Age — which is here already, not still in the birthing process¹³ — the new mission frontier is amongst the people we encounter — as in the Apostolic Age. Therefore, a major emphasis of ministry of the Church should be on equipping for personal evangelism, and equipping and allowing the people to grow in their relationship with the Lord.

What is scary — but a problem to be resolved — is the levels of indifference¹⁴ that Christians can, and do, encounter in society. To counter that indifference it is increasingly important that every Christian knows himself / herself — and has a living relationship with the Lord. Then those around will say — as they did in the Apostolic Age — “*You have something special about you! Where can I get what you've got?*” Then evangelism becomes easy.¹⁵

Both the Pentecostal (1920s) and Charismatic renewals (1960/70s) — and both still ongoing, although not always as vibrantly as initially — were signs of the end of the Christendom Age. Christianity had become dead and sterile. The Holy Spirit was mentioned in the recitation of

11 I made a comment, on a book review web page on this material, that I had seen no fruit of this material in that Anglican diocese. The Bishop took me to task, as this material had been discussed at length in a training course for clergy. The comment remains — I have seen no evidence of fruit — or even recognition — of Mead's material.

12 I recently encountered a situation where a person had been obediently evangelising during visits to his local hospital. His parish priest — who did nothing about any form of ministry to the hospital — warned him off saying, “Ministry to the hospital is my preserve — butt out!”

13 Although, in some places, the birthing is still happening — a breach birth — very slowly and painfully!

14 Hindus have always been more difficult to evangelise than Muslims, because Hindus include Jesus as yet another in their pantheon of Gods, and say, “Yes, I believe in Jesus,” without any understanding of his saving work.

15 I have been challenged to make this emphasis on evangelism a living reality in my own life, and have in recent months been focussing on trying to evangelise Jehovah Witnesses. In the process I am finding that most were nominal Christians who were trapped by the false doctrines of the Witnesses. They never had a living relationship with the Lord, and are now precluded from that.

the Creeds, and the day of Pentecost (renamed Whit-Sunday) was celebrated as a remembrance of a remote past event — like the Battle of Waterloo¹⁶ — to which one has no emotional involvement. Those who were part of these renewals confronted their brethren in the other churches and insulted them by asking, aggressively, “Are you saved?” Part of the indignant reaction was because the question wasn't understood, as the need for a personal encounter with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit had never been taught¹⁷.

Out of those renewals emerged, in some instances, a new model of the Church, known, loosely, as the hyper-faith movement. This movement, marked by huge mega-churches with the focus being on one person's ministry and teaching. Their credo might be, “We believe in Pastor, Jesus and Holy Spirit! (Pastor's word carries a weight of inspiration, so must be obeyed at all costs! — without any claim of infallibility.) These should be vibrant exemplars to the Church of what is possible if one has deep faith (hyper-faith), but, sadly, their leaders usually have little or no formal theological or biblical education behind them and have built houses of straw. The doctrine they teach is an adaptation of the Gnostic heresy of the first and second centuries of the Apostolic Age.

Worse still, they fall into the trap of accepting temptations. Jesus was tempted in the desert:

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: "Since you are God's Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread." Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth."

For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said, "Since you are God's Son, jump." The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: "He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won't so much as stub your toe on a stone." Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: "Don't you dare test the Lord your God."

For the third test, the Devil took him up to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth's kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, "They're yours—lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they're yours." Jesus' refusal was curt: "Beat it, Satan!" He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: "Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness."

The Test was over. The Devil left. And in his place, angels! Angels came and took care of Jesus' needs. Matthew 4:1-11 (Message)

These 'hyper-faith' pastors accept the third temptation — the whole world is at their feet, hanging on every word they speak. They are deceived into believing it is not the Devil they are worshipping, but God. It is common to hear statements like, “I am walking in God's will and doing his work; and see how wonderfully he provides.”¹⁸

16 It is a relatively modern theory in Baptist theology (Darbyism) that God works in and through various *dispensations* (with no scriptural basis). The theory says that the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost to get it growing, but that dispensation is past, so the Holy Spirit doesn't work today — is no longer needed by the Church. The theory is clearly flawed, but the behaviour of many — across most denominations — is to behave as though that is a living truth.

17 Some Christians — influenced by (fundamentalist) Baptist and rigidly Reformed (Calvinist) teaching — teach that a living relationship with God is established by reading the Word, and the Word is the only means of entry into a relationship with God. Yes, reading the Word is important, but it is not *either* the Word *or* contemplative prayer, it is both-and. Their understanding of prayer is stunted — limited to intercession — so theirs seems a logical argument.

18 They teach a prosperity gospel, distorted from Malachi 3 — “If you give abundantly, God will bless you abundantly...” — as a way of manipulating God, and creating hyper-wealthy churches and pastors.

The challenge in the Emerging Age is to:

- x embrace change — not, as a fruit of the Christendom Age — vigorously resist it.
- x evangelise the lost, so that, as in Acts 2:47, “Every day their number grew as God added those who were saved.” (*The Message*)
- x *break the mental and spiritual bondage of the 'right way to be and do Church' of the Christendom age.*

Study Guide – Ages of the Church

Questions for reflection

Proverbs 29:18 says:

“Where there is no vision, the people are unrestrained.” NASB95 or

“If people can’t see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves.” *The Message*

Perhaps it goes even further, “*Where there is no expectation that the Lord can, and will, work, he doesn't and won't!*”

1. Think about how different life was in the Early Church — the Apostolic Age. To be a Christian could mean you were going to be executed any day. Yet the Church grew exponentially. Discuss why these seemingly contradictory things happened. Was the growth because of the persecution, or despite it? Think of the differences between then and now — is the present-day Church better or worse off than the Apostolic Age Church? Why? or Why not?
2. Think about some of the things that have become important in the Christendom Age. In the Middle Ages (about 12th and 13th centuries) priests started to wear smart street-dress as their neighbours did. These garments became more and more ornate and elaborate. Suddenly the priest was self-promoted to be in a much higher sphere of activity than the *laos*, the people of God, the Body of Christ. Now when a priest dares to wear a suit to celebrate holy communion, there is an outcry, “He / she must wear the traditional clobber!” Then, incense was introduced, because in a densely packed church full of unwashed humanity, the stink was overpowering. Incense was used as a deodorant. But it has become spiritualised to be ‘*the aroma of the prayers of the people rising up to the Lord.*’ The means to an end has become an end in itself (not in every church). Reflect on these, and other similar issues. Do they add anything to our worship, or detract?

The chant / litany of the Christendom Age is “As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,” forgetting that in the beginning was the Apostolic Age — and not seeing a need to recapture that vitality.

The challenge to the Emerging Church is to embrace change and evangelise the lost; so that some of the vitality of the Apostolic Age is restored. Going with that, we need to examine, critically, what we do in a worship service (particularly round holy communion) and ask, “Is that helpful? Why do we do that? Should we still be doing that?”

Ages of the Church – A Postscript

There is an interesting initiative in the Church of England led by Bishop Graham Cray, which echoes some of the needs of the Emerging Age — by 'Changing Church for a Changing World' — see the website at www.freshexpressions.org.uk. In his introduction Bishop Cray says:

"It is a way of describing the planting of new congregations or churches which are different in ethos and style from the church which planted them; because they are designed to reach a different group of people than those already attending the original church. There is no single model to copy but a wide variety of approaches for a wide variety of contexts and constituencies. The emphasis is on planting something which is appropriate to its context, rather than cloning something which works elsewhere." And:

"Some fresh expressions are very different from church as we are used to it in the UK - there is a surfer church on Polzeath beach, a Eucharist for Goths in central Cambridge, a youth congregation based in a skate park, and cell church among the Merseyside Police (yes I did say cell church!). Others are more familiar but in unfamiliar settings - church in a café, church in the function room of a pub, church in a school, church in a gym or a sports club. They can be found in rural areas as well as in towns and cities, and have been planted to reach all age groups, pensioners as well as those focused on children or young families. There is no intention to divide people up. The Goth service does not have black clad security guards to ban non Goths at the door. But the aim is to plant church into the communities to which people actually belong. Then those churches can reach out to people who are different as well. Many churches are neighbourhood based. Fresh expressions also try to plant the church into networks." And:

"This is based on two important biblical principles, both found in 1 Corinthians. First they assume that when the gospel is preached in a new community, God grows a church, not just wins some individual Christians. Paul says that he planted the gospel seed, other s watered it, but God gave the growth and what he grew was the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3:6-9). He also says that when the new believers were baptised, they were all baptised 'into one body' (12:13) The second principle is that, just as God's Son entered our world to win us, so Christian missionaries need to enter the cultures they are trying to reach (9:19-23), so that new believers only have to face the stumbling block of the cross (1:18-25), and not the stumbling block of church culture as well! They can then become agents for change within their culture rather than be drawn out of it into a church culture, which may be alien to them."

I was intending to approach +Steve (Johannesburg) and hope that he would catch my vision of what, I believe, is an initiative of the Lord.

Why has Jesus not come again?

Because the plan of salvation is that everybody on earth should be saved — that is why he is waiting. Peter writes:

"But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:8-9 ESV)

However I asked the Lord why he had led me to Boksburg. The answer clearly was to intervene in what was an independent parish, Boksburg North — St. Gabriel's — which,

because the area became a slum, was no longer financially viable and was placed in the Boksburg parish as a chapelry. I wrote to and saw +David (Highveld), suggesting that I be given a reasonable time to return that to a viable independent parish again. In a prayer-time the Lord showed me Ezekiel 37 — the Valley of the dry bones. As I meditated on it, the Holy Spirit was with me strongly, renewing and enhancing my vision.

Discussing this with another priest of another diocese, he suggested, I believe discerning the Lord's hand, that I just start a fresh expressions church in the area — and perhaps later offer a growing work to the bishop (+David's successor) for incorporation into St. Gabriel's.

On reflection I felt that, because of the financial issues — such as needing transport and better accommodation — this would be beyond my capability to get started.

So, back to plan A — to see +Steve, hoping and praying that we can share a vision and he can identify a potential situation that I could contribute to.