

Break the rules like an artist



Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist. – Pablo Picasso

Vincent Van Gogh is widely known today as a typically eccentric artist. He might not have invented Impressionism, but he was the first to paint stars swirling uncontrollably in the night sky, or to depict sunflowers as golden explosions, or the sky on fire above a wheatfield. His pictures were vivid, wild, daring, chaotic, full of bright yellows and deep blues.

If you've ever had the opportunity to visit the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and be surrounded by a room full of his work – *Sunflowers*, *Irises*, *Almond Blossom*, *The Bedroom* and *Potato Eaters* – you'll know the powerful visceral effect it can have. And yet, if you go to the 2nd floor to the "Van Gogh Close Up" exhibit you'll find scores of meticulous drawings of hands and feet made by Vincent when he was beginning to learn art. And then it dawns on you – Vincent didn't simply pick up a brush and start painting *A Starry Night*. He took boring art classes. He submitted himself to the slow discipline of learning his craft.



It's because the grand masters all submitted themselves to their craft. They learned **the rules** before they dared break them.

Artist, Alexander McQueen once said, ***"You've got to break the rules, but keep the tradition."***

I think it's the same when it comes to Christian discipleship. The church needs innovators. We need more rule-breakers. But we need

the kind of rule-breakers who took the long, slow painful time to learn the rules that need breaking.

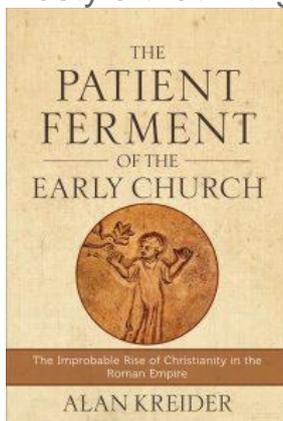
In his final book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, Alan Kreider examined the first 400 years of the church's history in an attempt to explain its extraordinary impact on the Roman world.

What he found was that, far from the common view that the church grew like wildfire across the empire, the people of God slowly and patiently fostered the conditions that turned them into a force that could not be contained.

Kreider says they did this three fundamental ways:

1. **they embodied a patient eschatological hope, trusting in what God had said about the future;**
2. **they committed themselves to countercultural communal practices or habits;**
3. **they disciplined newcomers via a formal catechesis and alternative worship.**

This is so different to the way we're taught to grow the church today, when there seems to be a new church strategy coming at us every month. Kreider says the early church focused their attentions not on strategies, but on habits, prayer, teaching, and worship. They trusted that God was at work in the world, lived in radical obedience to Jesus, and shaped an alternative lifestyle that intrigued and attracted outsiders.



The “patient ferment” Kreider is talking about involves a new kind of discipleship, one that focuses not on strategies or outcomes, but on learning and habits. And getting these embedded into the life of a believer takes time. Kreider observes that the early church didn't make it easy for newcomers to join, and they certainly didn't ease off once you'd become a member. The church instituted a rigorous form of *catechesis*, a program of spiritual formation and theological instruction carried out in preparation for baptism, lasting up to several years. They also fostered an alternative (for the time) form of worship, centering especially on prayer and food, the focus of which became the celebration of communion.

Kreider explains that via their lengthy catechesis the new believer encountered not only a vision of their new life in Christ, but they learned bodily actions that stretched them into ways of behaving in alignment with that new life.

Following baptism, the patient ferment of the early believers continued to bubble away. The new habits instilled in their lives ***“formed the character of the Christians, aligning them with God’s purposes and habituating them to the surprising ways of Christ’s church.”***

Once remade by this discipline the new believers were then unleashed on the world. The early church reinvented everything the world knew and understand about worship, community, justice, God and humanity. They were utterly radical.

Becoming radical doesn’t happen by the absence of controls or discipline.

True Christlikeness is so contrary to our natural impulses and interests that embracing it requires focus, patience, and discipline. It should be an unhurried, methodical process.

All that to say, making radical followers of Jesus is a slow, deliberate process.

We do need more Christians who can think differently, innovate, break the rules, disturb the status quo. But not in some undisciplined, chaotic sense.

If you think radical, eccentric Christianity is all just wild and carefree rule-breaking, think again.

All the great Christian rule-breakers of history submitted themselves to rigorous instruction and discipline as part of their journey into eccentricity.

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