

# “Four times the church got weird... and was better for it



It feels like the church gets weird every four or five hundred years, and it does the world of good. In fact, it could be argued that the church is at its best when it throws off its desire for acceptance and conventionality and launches into the strangest and most counter-cultural behaviour.

Here are four times when the church did exactly that, and history was changed.

## ***1. The Hiberno-Scottish missionaries (6th Century)***



The Hiberno-Scottish missionaries were Gaelic monks from Ireland (in Latin *Hibernia*) and the western coast of modern-day Scotland, who re-Christianized Britain and Western Europe after the fall of Rome. You might have heard of a few of their leading lights: St Columba of Iona, St Aidan of Lindisfarne [pictured], St Columbanus of the Franks.

They were wild people from a wild land, who harnessed their considerable passions and energies into Christian devotion. Rather than undergoing complete personality transplants, the Hiberno-Scots disciplined their passions without extinguishing them. They retained their sense of rowdiness and their love of wild, elemental places like the coastline of Scotland and northern England. They harnessed their love of drinking and singing and storytelling and directed it toward God. They practised hospitality, welcoming all comers.

They were deeply shaped by their new-found triune faith and saw the Trinity not only as a doctrine but as a framework for all human interactions, highly

valuing community, reconciliation and partnership. As a result, their monasteries weren't the cold stone castles of the later Medieval period, but Christian villages, places of agriculture and study, safety and conviviality.

But above all they were missionaries. When the abbot considered certain monks to be ready for missionary service – after years of learning and habit-forming – they would be sent out to take the gospel to the lost. This was done in a most bizarre fashion. The missionary monks were commissioned by their village and placed in a *coracle* – a small, circular boat made of wickerwork, covered with a watertight material – and pushed out from shore with the prayer that the Lord of the wind and the waves would take them to the very people He wanted them to save. Coracles were used by fisherman at the time and were propelled with a paddle, but the missionary monks were given no such implement.

They were entirely at the mercy of the wind and the tides. Wherever they ran aground, be it Frisia, the Frankish kingdom, or the land of the Norsemen, that was where they were to commence their missionary work of brokering peace, preaching the gospel, and founding monastery-villages like the ones from which they'd come.

These weird monks saved Europe from the darkness of constant war, bloodshed, superstition and disease and helped the continent re-embrace Christianity and forge a new era of Christendom.

## **2. The Cistercians (11th Century)**



The Celts had landed in pagan Europe in order to re-Christianize a thoroughly post-Christian empire. But by the 11th century, Europe had been unified under Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire (later known as the Carolingian empire) and Christianity was once again the official state religion. All the worst excesses of their imperial status began to overcome the church – political power, material wealth, military might and more.

The greatest challenge facing the church was no longer paganism, it was **nominalism**. (*sounds familiar to me!*)

Around this time a group of French Benedictine monks became deeply disillusioned with such nominalism, and frustrated with many of their fellow monks, so they decided to withdraw to live a solitary life at Cîteaux, near Dijon. There they resolved to live under the strictest interpretation of the Rule of St. Benedict. That meant they embraced a severe form of asceticism.

They also refused to accept any feudal revenues, believing it to be sullied by the church's collusion with the state. And they introduced manual labour for monks, making it a principal feature of their common life, and the primary means of their financial support.

They took seriously, the 48th chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict states **"...for then are they monks in truth, if they live by the work of their hands."**

As a result, the Cistercians became known for their motto, ***Ora et labora – Pray and Work.***

In its heyday, the Cistercians had 270 monasteries from Sweden to Portugal and from Scotland to the countries of the eastern Mediterranean, and they were the weirdest monks of all. Europe was used to warrior monks who loved their food and ale (think of Friar Tuck), but the Cistercians were lean, disciplined, hard-working, and peaceful.

They reclaimed unwanted or marginal land and worked it tirelessly, becoming in effect a large, disciplined, unpaid labor force. They were also free from the tariffs and taxes imposed by feudal lords. This made their business enterprises – whether wheat or wool or beer – remarkably profitable, which helped finance the founding of even more monasteries. They're credited with contributing to the whole economic boom of the 12th century because of their developments in farming techniques, hydraulic engineering and metallurgy.

For about a hundred years, these strange monks were about the only ones championing the cause of Christ and providing a flickering flame of truth and life in the midst of Europe's dark centuries.

### ***3. The Anabaptists (16th Century)***



By the 16th Century, all the early fears of the Cistercians were fulfilled. The corruption of the church was widespread and well entrenched. Not even the Reformation had brought widespread renewal of church or managed to decouple the church from the corrupting influence of the state.

The sons and daughters of the original reformers believed their fathers had been too restrained. They wanted the Reformation to go further, to not only institute a theological revolution, but an ecclesial one.

They wanted to eliminate the priesthood, abandon infant baptism (which had become a de facto kind of European birth registration), undo the parish system, abolish the privileges of the nobility, cardinals and popes, offer civil and human rights to all people, and distribute wealth to everyone who had need.

They were trouble with a capital **T**.

While some radical reformers chose the road of violent insurrection, for the most part they were pacifists, known eventually by the name, *Anabaptist*, which means “rebaptizer,” because of their practice of baptising adult converts.

For this they were punished by death by drowning, a cruel irony perpetrated by their enemies.

You might not think the way you practice the sacraments would get you into that much trouble, but when the Anabaptists refused to accept your baptism as an infant, this was seen as tantamount to not recognising you as a European citizen. Indeed, by repudiating their own first baptisms they were effectively renouncing their citizenship. And they knew it.

They saw themselves as citizens of God’s kingdom, not of this world. As non-citizens they refused to take oaths, join the military, or participate in civil government. Neither the religious nor the secular empires couldn’t cope with that. Europe’s rulers, fearing an uprising of the lower classes, hounded all Anabaptists as insurrectionists.

They were persecuted mercilessly, but remained unbowed, their influence continuing to today.

#### 4. *The Pentecostals (20th Century)*



Pentecostalism is the most outwardly weird of the movements we're exploring. I mean, speaking in tongues, gyrating and dancing in the Spirit, prophesying and praising, that definitely made them stand out.

By the very early 1900s a boisterous new movement was exploding across the USA, and eventually around the world. When *Life* magazine listed the top 100 events of the second millennium, they put the birth of Pentecostalism at 68th.

It is very probably the most significant development in 20th century Christianity.

The Topeka evangelist, Charles Parham, and the Azusa Street missionary, William Seymour, both agreed that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament – including speaking in tongues (*glossolalia*) – are for all Christians today. It's not like no one had spoken in tongues before then, but it had been thought of as a "second blessing", a confirming, devotional experience given to contrite believers. Parham began teaching that speaking in tongues was the initial physical evidence of the infilling of the Holy Spirit. In other words, every Spirit-filled believer should speak in tongues.

But there was more to Pentecostalism than tongue-speaking. In the beginning, in California, it was a working class movement. It not only attracted the poor and marginalised, but its leaders developed an early theology of poverty, a belief that God had a preference for the poor. As the movement boomed, early Pentecostals interpreted their growth as an example of God's special favour on the poor.

Furthermore, Pentecostals were known for their commitments to both racial reconciliation and women's rights. William Seymour, the leader of the Azusa Street Revival was black, and Pentecostals' most famous early leaders, the

extraordinary Aimee Semple McPherson, was a white woman. Many early Pentecostal churches were noted for having blacks and whites, and men and women, worshipping and sharing leadership in the church.

Even less known was that many early Pentecostals were pacifists. Less than a decade after the beginning of their movement, many prominent Pentecostal leaders opposed America's involvement in the outbreak of World War I, Indeed, every major Pentecostal denomination has at some point adopted a pacifist resolution.

Racially integrated, affirming of women, opposed to war, on the side of the poor, filled with the Spirit – no one had seen a movement quite like this before. And understandably they were rebuffed by the other Protestant denominations. Indeed, in some cases they attracted the most vehement attacks from both secular and church voices. Nonetheless, later they were forced to admit that while cathedrals and churches across Los Angeles were closing their doors, crowds continued to stream into churches like Aimee Semple McPherson's Angelus Temple.

The Pentecostals were committed to a decidedly counter-cultural form of holiness. They banned alcohol, tobacco, and movie-going. At various times, some Pentecostal churches frowned on chewing gum, lipstick, short-sleeved dresses, certain soft drinks, and even neckties. As noted, many of their members were drawn from the working class and a great number were from less reputable backgrounds, where gambling and drinking were corrosive and debilitating practices.

The Pentecostals ran soup kitchens and homeless shelters and other charitable initiatives designed to help the less fortunate. But they also fostered a kind of spirituality in which addicts and the indigent could be healed of their afflictions and straighten up and fly right. They endeavoured to create communities that were free of the vices they were preaching against. Although I'm not sure why they had a problem with neckties.

*The Celts were weird because of their outlandish missionary bravery, the Cistercians for their asceticism, the Anabaptists for their non-conformism, the Pentecostals for their boisterous spirituality.*

*And all of them were viewed suspiciously by the staid and culturally acceptable church of their time, and in the Anabaptists' case, persecuted outright.*

Any call to keep Christianity weird shouldn't be heard as an encouragement to be hip or popular. None of these weird movements were ever popular ones.

They were devout. They were disciplined.

And..... “***they turned their worlds upside down.***”

Maybe its time for us to get a little weirder!!

Rev Dr Mike Frost