

After Christendom: A Study Guide

Introduction

Since *Post-Christendom* was published by Paternoster in March 2004 to launch the 'After Christendom' series of books, a number of people have suggested to me that a study guide would be useful to help them work their way through the many issues the book addresses. This might include:

- A timeline to show how Christendom developed and its relation to other historical events.
- A short chapter-by-chapter summary to help those who struggle with book-length arguments.
- Diagnostic exercises to help us identify Christendom-oriented thinking.
- Practical examples of how the Christendom legacy continues to influence us.
- Further questions to consider (beyond those at the end of several chapters).
- Bible studies to encourage us to reconsider interpretations unduly influenced by Christendom.

My initial response was that *Post-Christendom* is only the first of several books in the 'After Christendom' series. It contains much more historical material than the other books will and lays foundations on which others will build. Later books in the series will unpack its ideas and explore many issues in more detail. Maybe further resources are not necessary at this stage.

Early responses to *Church after Christendom*, since its publication in February 2005, indicate that many people have found this second book in the series more accessible. It seems to have addressed some of the issues a study guide might have covered. This may also be the case with books that have yet to be published, which will provide further insights and resources on issues that *Post-Christendom* mentioned only briefly.

However, as I have reflected on the responses to *Post-Christendom*, I have warmed to the idea of a study guide with at least some of the resources requested. The best way forward seems to be a web-based resource that is freely accessible and also available in a form that can be downloaded for personal or group use. So I hope what follows is helpful and meets the needs of those who have approached me over the past year or so. And I welcome suggestions for improving and developing this.

Timeline and Maps

The approach of the 'After Christendom' series is to divide the history of the church in Western Europe into three periods:

- Pre-Christendom (from the birth of the church until the first part of the 4th century)
- Christendom (from the 4th to the 20th centuries)
- Post-Christendom (from the 20th century onwards)

This is, of course, over-simplified (as all such schemes tend to be) and the shifts from pre-Christendom to Christendom and from Christendom to post-Christendom cannot be dated precisely. But the authors of the series argue that there are major differences between the approaches of Christians in these periods to the topics they cover – faith and politics, worship and mission, church and society, etc. We find it surprising that those who trace the history of the church and its mission do not more often comment on the significance of these shifts. (See further on this, if you are interested, an article by Alan Kreider entitled ‘Beyond Bosch: the Early Church and the Christendom Shift’ at www.anabaptistnetwork.com/articles).

There are several websites with timelines, maps and other resources that illustrate the major incidents and characters in church history. Although these sites do not use the threefold division we are advocating, they provide very helpful background material that can easily be cross-referenced with the books in the series and the other resources we provide here. It does not seem necessary to try to duplicate here the resources of these websites, so we are simply listing some of the more interesting sites:

<http://www.churchtimeline.com>: an extensive collection of resources covering the whole era.

<http://www.olivetree.com/history/>: a timeline that covers the biblical period as well as an overview of significant figures in church history.

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Pines/7224/Rick/chronindex.htm>: a century-by-century timeline with commentary on significant events and people.

<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/jc.html>: a detailed timeline from Jesus to Constantine (313).

http://www.tredways.org/church_history/: timelines that provide a simple overview and (by clicking on the period of interest) more information as required.

<http://www.cwo.com/~pentrack/catholic/chron.html>: timeline of the whole of church history from a Roman Catholic perspective.

<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/timeline/>: various timelines grouped under subject areas and all from an Anglican perspective.

<http://www.saintignatiuschurch.org/timeline.html>: a timeline from the perspective of the Orthodox Church, which regards most of western Christendom as a deviation from the true church.

<http://www3.la.psu.edu/courses/worldreligions/maps-christianity.htm>: simple maps of the biblical era and the spread of Christianity.

<http://www.culturalresources.com/Maps.html>: an enormous set of links to maps of all kinds, including many that illustrate the context of church history in Western Europe.

<http://historymedren.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.euratlas.com/atlas.htm>: a collection of maps showing Europe at the beginning of every century from 1 to 2000.

<http://www.roman-emperors.org/Index.htm>: a similar resource to the previous one, showing Europe (and North Africa and the Middle East) from 1 to 1500.

Post-Christendom: A thumbnail sketch

The basic argument of the book can be summed up in the following steps:

Chapter 1: The End of Christendom

- The church in western societies is experiencing a significant culture shift and is moving, slowly and unsteadily, into uncharted territory (the 'strange new world' of the book's subtitle).
- Although this culture shift has many different components, including the shift from modernity to postmodernity, one key element is the end of Christendom.
- We experience this as a period of decline and discouragement as the church in western societies (but not in many other parts of the world) loses ground in terms of numbers and influence.
- We may be tempted to indulge in nostalgia, to bury our heads in the sand or to pin our hopes on revival, but it may be better to welcome post-Christendom as a new opportunity for faithful discipleship and creative mission.
- In order to understand the significance of post-Christendom, we need first to explore the Christendom era that is now fading and the legacy it has left us.

Chapter 2: The Coming of Christendom

- The beginning of the Christendom era can be traced to the 4th century and the decision of the emperor Constantine I to adopt and promote Christianity.
- Historians argue about the nature of Constantine's conversion and his motives in championing Christianity, but his influence was profound, bringing the church in from the margins to the centre of society.
- The church had been growing very rapidly during the previous century, but Constantine's decision took church leaders by surprise and they acclaimed him (almost unanimously) despite questions about his character and intentions.
- As a result of the patronage of the church by Constantine and his successors, including substantial financial support, the church grew in numbers and social status during the 4th century.
- Conversions were due to several factors: the intellectual appeal of Christianity, the church's care for the poor, growing social pressure, better career prospects and some forms of coercion.
- At the end of the 4th century the emperor Theodosius I effectively outlawed all other religions so that Christianity became the official imperial religion.
- But was the church right to accept the patronage of Constantine and to allow itself to be co-opted as the imperial religion?

Chapter 3: The Expansion of Christendom

- At the start of the 5th century, Christians were at the centre of society but still as a privileged minority, rather than a majority.
- Over the next few centuries remarkable efforts were made to strengthen the hold of Christendom upon its heartlands and to extend its influence across the empire and beyond its boundaries.
- Gradually paganism and most other religions were eradicated (the Jews were allowed to continue but were often under pressure) and in 529 Justinian made conversion compulsory.
- As the Roman Empire collapsed and Europe entered the so-called Dark Ages, the church functioned as a unifying and civilising force, successfully making the transition into a new era.
- Christendom spread through various methods: gradual infiltration, missionary enterprises, inter-marriage, conquest and coercion. The conversion of Europe was finally completed late in the 14th century.
- In theory everyone believed, behaved and belonged within Christendom, but the catechesis of new Christians was now very limited.
- Christendom had triumphed and its achievements were wonderful, but how Christian was Christendom and its missionary methods?

Chapter 4: The Christendom Shift

- Before tracing the history of Christendom into the Middle Ages, we need to examine carefully the nature of the 4th-century shift from pre-Christendom to Christendom.
- The theological architect of Christendom was Augustine of Hippo. Although he was ambivalent about the empire, he accommodated the church's theology and practices to the new situation, introducing numerous innovations.
- The Christendom shift was profound, involving in effect a re-engineering of the church's DNA in the areas of faith and discipleship, church and society, church life, mission and ethics.
- Further details of this critical shift can be found [here](#).
- Two potent illustrations of this shift are the dramatically changed meanings of both baptism and the cross.
- Despite the overwhelming support of the church for this shift, there were some who objected, including the monastic movement, the Donatists and Pelagius. Their concerns were dismissed at the time but resurfaced in later centuries.
- But what were the costs and benefits of the Christendom shift, and were there any alternatives in the 4th and 5th centuries?

Chapter 5: The Heart of Christendom

- The culture of Christendom that flourished during the Middle Ages was rich and remarkable, but it was also oppressive towards any who dissented.
- The outworkings of the Christendom shift became entrenched in society, as pre-Christendom approaches to issues such as truth-telling and violence were superseded by oath-taking and participation in warfare.

- Christendom required that people read the Bible in ways that supported the status quo, gave precedence to the Old Testament and marginalised Jesus.
- Church life also reflected the Christendom shift as large congregations were dominated by a clerical caste, who performed services and gave monologue sermons, and who operated in a hierarchical structure that imposed punitive church discipline.
- In the Christendom era the emphasis was on institutional maintenance rather than mission. Where evangelistic mission occurred it was generally delegated to specialist agencies and sometimes involved coercion. Other dimensions of mission involved offering counsel to the state and christianising culture.
- But throughout this era there were marginal movements that protested against the Christendom system, advocating and practising alternative approaches to the Bible, church and mission. These included the Waldensians and Lollards.
- How do we listen to both the mainstream and the margins from this era? What can we learn from each?

Chapter 6: The Disintegration of Christendom

- By the 16th century Christendom was in turmoil – economic, political, social and spiritual – and was starting to disintegrate.
- The Protestant Reformation offered one way forward, retaining most of the assumptions of the Christendom system, including state churches, but trying to reform this system.
- The reformers, however, made only limited changes on the issues of biblical interpretation, church life and the nature of mission.
- Catholicism also underwent a process of reform and reorganisation, with the result that different versions of Christendom – Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican – emerged. Christendom fragmented into competing and hostile mini-Christendoms.
- Another way forward was the Anabaptist movement, the heirs of the medieval marginal movements, which rejected the Christendom system as beyond mere reform and planted new churches free from state control.
- Anabaptists developed alternative approaches to biblical interpretation, church life and mission, but they were persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants.
- How do we respond when we perceive problems within the church – remain in the current structures and work for renewal, or come out and build anew on fresh foundations?

Chapter 7: The Christendom Legacy

- Between the 17th and 20th centuries the demise of Christendom took place, as various factors undermined its legitimacy.
- These included: the Enlightenment reliance on reason rather than revelation, the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation, the arrival of postmodernity, the persistence of dissent and the globalisation of the church and its mission.
- However, there are numerous vestiges of Christendom that have outlasted the political entity, both in the church and in society.
- Further details of these vestiges can be found [here](#).

- As we identify these various vestiges, we need to consider their significance and decide whether to endorse, ignore or challenge them.
- More pervasive, though less obvious, is the Christendom mindset that guides our thinking and reactions on a range of issues.
- Further details of this mindset can be found [here](#).
- There are different ways of responding to the Christendom legacy: denying it, defending it, dismissing it, dissociating ourselves from it, demonising it or disavowing it.
- Disavowing is the best option, which involves disentangling the many threads, deciding what to retain and what to reject.
- In what ways are we influenced by the Christendom mindset or enmeshed in Christendom vestiges, and how will we respond to these?

Chapter 8: Post-Christendom: Mission

- Although the Christendom era was characterised primarily by maintenance rather than mission, in the latter part of the era mission returned in various forms.
- Mission took place beyond the boundaries of Christendom as Catholic and then Protestant missionaries accompanied those who explored and conquered the New World.
- Despite noble exceptions, these missions were marred by cultural imposition and considerable violence.
- Mission also took place within Christendom as concern grew about the low level of morality and spirituality within an officially Christian society.
- Evangelism is problematic in post-Christendom, not least because of the very ambiguous legacy of mission within and beyond Christendom in the previous centuries.
- Despite the temptation to abandon it, we need to rehabilitate and reconfigure evangelism for post-Christendom.
- There are important challenges facing us as we engage in mission in a plural society and learn to engage creatively with other faith communities.
- We also will need to learn fresh ways of engaging in social transformation as a marginal community that no longer wields social power of the kind we were used to exercising.
- And we will need to renegotiate our relationship with the state, succumbing neither to delusions of past status nor temptations to disengage.
- What will it mean to be reconstituted as a marginal missionary movement in the strange new world of post-Christendom?

Chapter 9: Post-Christendom: Church

- Reconstituting ourselves for mission also involves rethinking what kind of church can incarnate the good news in post-Christendom.
- Across western culture, fresh expressions of church are emerging, energised by longings for more authentic forms of community, worship and mission.
- Examining these emerging churches through the post-Christendom lens both affirms their significance and poses significant questions for them.

- But the vast majority of Christians belong to inherited forms of church and the shift to post-Christendom offers opportunities to take a fresh look at practices that were rooted in the Christendom system and challenged by the dissidents.
- These include the clergy/laity divide, monologue sermons, church discipline and attitudes to war and economics.
- Church after Christendom will need to be relatively simple if it is to survive.
- But simplicity does not mean banality. We need to re-imagine church for post-Christendom.
- We might re-imagine the church as a community stirred by poets and story-tellers, a monastic missionary order and a safe place to take risks.
- Are the immediate prospects of the church in western societies best summed up as revival or survival?

Chapter 10: Post-Christendom: Resources

- There are many more questions than answers in the current transitional period between Christendom and post-Christendom.
- Our responses to contemporary challenges need to be provisional and we will need to appreciate many kinds of resources.
- We can draw on pre-Christendom, anti-Christendom (dissident), Christendom and extra-Christendom (global) movements.
- We will need to think carefully about how we interpret the Bible, recovering marginalised texts and questioning received interpretations, rejoicing in the new angle of vision available to a marginal community.
- We may need to reconsider important theological commitments and ethical stances, suspicious of the influence of Christendom on them.
- Some images may help us come to terms with our current situation, including marginality, liminality, exile, pilgrimage and church on the edge.
- And our terminology may need adjusting as we reflect on the language used in the Christendom era and its suitability (or lack of this) in post-Christendom.
- Most fundamentally, post-Christendom offers us an opportunity to recover the radical Jesus whom Christendom marginalised and follow him courageously onto the margins of this strange new world.

The Christendom Shift

Chapter 4 of *Post-Christendom* contains a long list of issues that were impacted by the 4th-century Christendom shift. It is not possible to summarise these, so here is the list in case it is useful in this form for further study:

The transformation in how the church understood itself and its role in society was not accomplished in one generation. Some developments had roots predating Constantine and would take centuries to develop fully. Over time, however, the Christendom shift involved:

- The adoption of Christianity as the official religion of city, state or empire.
- Movement of the church from the margins to the centre of society.
- The creation and progressive development of a Christian culture or civilisation.

- The assumption that all citizens (except Jews) were Christian by birth.
- The development of a 'sacral society', *corpus Christianum*, where there was no freedom of religion and political power was divinely authenticated.
- The definition of 'orthodoxy' as the belief all shared, determined by powerful church leaders with state support.
- Imposition, by legislation and custom, of a supposedly Christian morality on the entire society (though normally Old Testament morality was applied).
- Infant baptism as the symbol of obligatory incorporation into Christian society.
- The defence of Christianity by legal sanctions to restrain heresy, immorality and schism.
- A hierarchical ecclesiastical system, based on a diocesan and parish arrangement, analogous to the state hierarchy and buttressed by state support.
- A generic distinction between clergy and laity, and relegation of laity to a largely passive role.
- Two-tier ethics, with higher standards of discipleship ('evangelical counsels') expected of clergy and those in religious orders.
- Sunday as an official holiday and obligatory church attendance, with penalties for non-compliance.
- The requirement of oaths of allegiance and oaths in law courts to encourage truth-telling.
- The construction of massive and ornate church buildings and the formation of huge congregations.
- Increased wealth for the church and obligatory tithes to fund the system.
- Division of the globe into 'Christendom' and 'heathendom' and wars waged in the name of Christ and the church.
- Use of political and military force to impose Christianity, regardless of personal conviction.
- Reliance on the Old Testament, rather than the New, to justify these changes.

The foundation of Christendom was a theocratic understanding of society and a close, though sometimes fraught, partnership between church and state, the two main pillars of society. The nature of this partnership varied. Over the centuries, power struggles between popes and emperors resulted in one or other holding sway. Previous chapters have revealed one emperor presiding over a church council and another submitting to a bishop's authority. But the system assumed the church was associated with a status quo understood as Christian and had vested interests in its maintenance. The church provided religious legitimation for state activities; the state provided secular support for ecclesiastical decisions.

Christendom excluded or reinterpreted elements of New Testament teaching that had been important in pre-Christendom:

Faith and discipleship

- Faith in Christ was no longer understood as the exercise of choice in a pluralistic environment where other choices were possible without penalty.
- The term 'conversion' mainly described, not the start of the Christian life, but entrance into a monastic community.

- Discipleship was interpreted as loyal citizenship, rather than commitment to the counter-cultural values of God's kingdom.
- Preoccupation with individual eternal destiny replaced expectation of the coming of God's kingdom.

Church and society

- There was no longer any significant distinction between 'church' and 'world'.
- The state was no longer accorded a limited preservative function but had replaced the church as the bearer of the meaning of history.
- Church was defined territorially and membership was compulsory, with no room for believers' churches comprised only of voluntary members.
- Such voluntary communities, called 'churches' in the New Testament, were now called 'sects' and condemned as schismatic.
- The church largely abandoned its prophetic role for a chaplaincy role, providing spiritual support, sanctifying social occasions and state policies.
- The idea of God's kingdom was reduced to a historical entity, coterminous with the state church, or relegated to the future.

Church life

- Believers' baptism as the means of incorporation into the church was regarded as appropriate only for first-generation converts from paganism.
- Church services became performance-oriented as multi-voiced participation and the exercise of charismatic gifts declined.
- A sacramental and penitential system developed that enabled the church hierarchy to control and dispense 'salvation', often at a price.
- Clerical power and the disappearance of the 'world' meant church discipline was punitive, even lethal, rather than expressing pastoral care and mutual admonition.

Mission

- The church's orientation was now towards maintenance rather than mission, and mission was carried out by specialist agencies, not congregations.
- Pastors and teachers were honoured, while apostles, prophets and evangelists were marginalised or regarded as obsolete (cf. Ephesians 4.11).
- Mission within and beyond Christendom was accomplished by top-down methods, including coercion and offering inducements.
- The vision of a new Christian nation, *corpus Christi*, scattered through the nations was replaced by a vision of an earthly Christian empire.

Ethics

- The church became more concerned about maintaining social order than achieving social justice.
- Because the church exercised control, ethical choices were justified by anticipated outcomes or consequences rather than inherent morality.
- Pleas for religious liberty were forgotten and persecution was imposed by those claiming to be Christians rather than upon them.

- Enemy-loving and peacemaking were replaced by the formation of a Christian army and the ‘just war’ theory or ‘holy war’ ideology.
- The cross was less a reminder of the laying down of life than a symbol carried into battle by those who would take the lives of others.

Assessing the Christendom Shift

Look again at the above summary of the impact of the Christendom shift on church and society.

How are we to assess this shift and its consequences? Here is a simple exercise to help us consider the possibilities.

Work through the summary and place by each item a number representing one of the following assessments:

1. This was a positive development that evolved quite naturally from the traditional thinking and practice of the pre-Christendom churches.
2. This was a positive development that was a deviation from traditional theology and practice but was justified by the changing circumstances.
3. This was a necessary development in the changing circumstances that had neither particularly positive nor particularly negative consequences.
4. This was a necessary development in the changing circumstances that had negative and regrettable consequences.
5. This was an illegitimate development that contravened the theology and practice of the pre-Christendom church and is difficult to square with the spirit of the gospel.
6. This was an illegitimate development that compromised the church and its message and led to horrendous consequences in the coming centuries.

You might also want to construct further categories (7, 8, 9 etc.) if these do not give you all the options you want to work with.

Once you have completed this assessment of the Christendom shift, you may want to identify the issues that concern you most and consider how you or your church might grapple with these.

Alternatives to the Christendom Shift

Chapter 4 of *Post-Christendom* challenges the suggestion that the church in the fourth century had no option but to accept the invitation to becoming the imperial church. It suggests that there *were* other ways fourth-century Christians might have interpreted Constantine’s adoption of Christianity and responded to his invitation:

- They might have recognised that all Roman emperors had used religion to impose order on the empire: Constantine was acting in a typically Roman (not Christian) way.
- They might have questioned his continuing allegiance to the Unconquered Sun and the nature of his allegiance to Christ.
- They might have challenged him to become a catechumen earlier and to have prepared for baptism before he became terminally ill.
- They might have encouraged him to behave as a true Christian, rather than a normal emperor, accepting this might have resulted in his reign being brief.
- They might have reflected on their survival and growth through 250 years of intermittent persecution and decided they did not need imperial protection or patronage.
- They might have differentiated between toleration and imperial endorsement, welcoming the former and courteously but firmly refusing the latter.
- They might have explained to Constantine that massive basilicas and lavish bequests were inappropriate for followers of Jesus.
- They might have insisted the cross symbolised sacrificial suffering and was inappropriate as a military standard, explaining that Jesus' followers were a peaceful people, who would not fight to defend the empire.
- They might have recalled their own experience of persecution and historic commitment to religious liberty and refused to persecute or pressurise others.
- They might have listened to dissenting voices warning that the theological reinterpretations of Augustine and others were leading them away from their roots and core values.

Another exercise: rank these suggestions in order, according to your judgement as to how realistic they seem to be. Then, starting with what you consider to be the most realistic, assess what impact this might have had on the development of Christendom.

And some further questions:

1. Some claim that the phenomenal growth of Christianity in this period means that, if not under Constantine, under one of his successors Christianity would have become the numerically dominant religion. Do you agree?
2. If so, need a numerically dominant religion become a state religion?
3. Might Europe have been christianised from the bottom up rather than from the top down, and what difference might this have made?
4. If the continuing numerical growth of the church had not been turbo-charged by state endorsement, might effective catechesis have continued, and what effect might this have had on church and society?
5. What can we learn from the history of the church in the Persian Empire, which never had a Constantine figure (but was very viciously persecuted once Constantine declared the Roman Empire Christian)? After centuries of mission, during which it became more numerous and widespread than European Christianity, it was eventually eradicated from large areas of Asia. Is this inevitable for a non-state religion?

6. If in the future the church in Europe again becomes numerous, even numerically dominant, what are the alternatives to re-inventing Christendom? Is faithfulness only possible for marginal communities, or is there a truly Christian way to handle power?

Vestiges of Christendom

Chapter 7 of *Post-Christendom* contains a long list of Christendom vestiges. It is not possible to summarise these, so here is the list in case it is useful in this form for further study:

Ecclesiastical vestiges

- The Church of England is the established church, acknowledging the monarch as supreme governor and claiming official status by its very name, which by implication excludes other denominations.
- The self-identity of the non-established Church of Scotland is of a national church.
- The monarch appoints Anglican bishops, on the recommendation of the prime minister, from a shortlist of candidates the church prepares. The state can veto episcopal appointments.
- Church leaders participate in state ceremonies, during which they engage in acts of worship (although increasingly representatives of other faiths also participate).
- Some decisions of the Church of England's General Synod require state endorsement (the requisite majority of the 'three houses' approved the decision to ordain women, but this needed ratification by both Houses of Parliament).
- The parish system symbolises and implements the ubiquity of the established church, regardless of the presence of other congregations.
- The Church of England is legally obliged to provide marriage and funeral services. Clergy of many denominations act as state registrars.
- The Church of England is a major landowner and, despite falling income and rising costs, a very wealthy institution.
- The Chi-Rho symbol, Constantine's labarum, adorns many churches and chapels instead of the cross.
- The cross is associated in many communities with conquest and coercion, not suffering and self-giving love.
- Many church buildings contain military paraphernalia, including regimental flags, plaques commemorating war casualties and soldiers' graves.
- Most denominations endorse the 'just war' theory.
- Though many denominations have more members elsewhere than in Europe, representatives of historic Christendom nations dominate their structures and culture.
- Many denominations and agencies maintain structures that perpetuate outdated 'sending nations' and 'mission fields' concepts.
- Infant baptism is still widely practised (not only in the state church), but there are concerns about indiscriminate christening.

- Leadership structures in many newer denominations mirrors Christendom arrangements (albeit with different titles).
- The dominance of monologue sermons is evident in all denominations (with longer sermons in newer churches).
- The popularity of tithing in newer churches is encouraging Anglicans and Catholics to return to an abandoned Christendom practice.
- Church discipline is not taught in theological colleges, congregations are not equipped to practise this and attempts to exercise discipline are frequently ineffective or authoritarian.
- Inherited or chosen architectural styles of church buildings maintain aspects of Christendom ecclesiology. Many resemble lecture halls or theatres, disabling multi-voiced worship.
- Special clothes continue to designate a clerical caste with special powers and privileges.

Social vestiges

- The monarch's coronation takes place in Westminster Abbey and involves senior church leaders, who present a Bible as a 'rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes', anoint the monarch with oil with reference to Old Testament kings, present a sword for the monarch to 'protect the holy Church of God' and bestow a ring with a ruby cross, urging the monarch to be the 'defender of Christ's religion.'
- The monarch swears to 'maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel'; 'maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law'; 'maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England'; and 'preserve unto the Bishops and Clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges, as by law do or shall appertain to them or any of them.'
- The National Anthem combines unquestioning support for the monarch with prayer for military success.
- Coins carry inscriptions committing the monarch to defend the (Anglican) faith (D.G.REG.F.D).
- The Union Flag comprises crosses of St George, St Andrew and St Patrick, the 'patron saints' of England, Scotland and Ireland.
- Remembrance Day ceremonies offer prayers of thanksgiving for military success.
- State-funded chaplains serve in the armed forces and accompany them to war, implicitly supporting their actions.
- Christian prayers take place daily in both Houses of Parliament.
- Two archbishops and twenty-four diocesan bishops are 'Lords Spiritual' sitting in the House of Lords.
- The English legal system includes 'canon law', which governs church affairs, and ecclesiastical courts.
- Anyone on the parish electoral role (whatever their religious views) may vote to elect church wardens.

- The launching of ships involves a ‘christening’ ceremony, invoking God’s blessing on the vessel.
- Blasphemy laws (though rarely invoked) protect only the Church of England, not other denominations or religions.
- Churches enjoy the presumption their activities are charitable and so receive significant tax benefits.
- Schools must provide daily acts of collective worship ‘wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character.’
- School, college and bank holidays are planned around or associated primarily with the Christmas and Easter festivals.
- Despite continuing erosion, there are still restrictions on economic and social activities on Sundays.
- Use of oaths in the courts and legal processes (although affirmation is now available) remains normal.
- Oaths of allegiance are sworn by people in various institutions. Members of the police force, for instance, swear oaths in an annual service.

Responding to the Vestiges of Christendom

Look again at the above summary of the vestiges of Christendom in both church and society.

Here is an exercise to help us consider how to regard these vestiges and engage with them. Work through the summary and place by each item a number representing one of the following assessments:

1. This is a practice derived from the Christendom era that is wholly welcome, despite the demise of Christendom, and worth defending and retaining.
2. This is a practice derived from the Christendom era that, despite being rooted in an outdated and flawed system, has become a valued part of our cultural heritage and is worth retaining (albeit for other than the reasons it was originally introduced).
3. This is a practice derived from the Christendom era that no longer makes sense in a post-Christendom society but has no harmful effects and is not worth challenging.
4. This is a practice derived from the Christendom era that is regrettable and damages the church and its witness but which there is yet no realistic prospect of eradicating.
5. This is a practice derived from the Christendom era that is regrettable and damages the church and its witness so seriously that we should take action to eradicate it.
6. This is a practice derived from the Christendom era that is unjust and inappropriate in post-Christendom and that church and society should take action to eradicate.

You might also want to construct further categories (7, 8, 9 etc.) if these do not give you all the options you want to work with.

The Christendom Mindset

Chapter 7 of *Post-Christendom* contains a list of aspects of the Christendom mindset. It is not possible to summarise these, so here is the list in case it is useful in this form for further study:

- Orientation towards maintaining (but perhaps tweaking) the status quo rather than advocating radical and disturbing change.
- Wanting to control history and bring in God's kingdom (even coercively) rather than trusting the future to God.
- Assuming Christians would govern nations more justly and effectively than others or that having more Christians in influential positions (especially in politics) would be beneficial.
- Over-emphasising church and internal ecclesial issues at the expense of God's mission and kingdom.
- A 'moral majority' stance on ethical issues, assuming the right of churches to instruct the behaviour of those beyond the church.
- A punitive rather than restorative approach to issues of justice and support for capital punishment as 'biblical.'
- Disgruntlement that Christian festivals (particularly Christmas and Easter) are no longer accorded the spiritual significance they once enjoyed.
- When reading the Bible, identifying naturally with the perspective of the rich and powerful.
- Readily finding analogies between Old Testament Israel and Britain (or America) as a 'Christian nation', reapplying biblical prophecies.
- Confusion about the relationship between patriotism and ultimate loyalty to God's kingdom and the transnational Christian community.
- A 'mainstream' interpretation of church history that marginalises the laity, dissident movements, women and the poor.
- Euro-centric theology that marginalises other perspectives on mission, church and biblical interpretation.
- Inattentiveness to the criticisms of those outraged by the historic association of Christianity with patriarchy, warfare, injustice and patronage.
- Using 'spiritual warfare' language without reflecting on issues of violence and insensitivity to its effect on users and observers.
- A latent persecution-mentality that lacks theological or ethical objections to imposing beliefs or behaviour on others.
- Partiality for respectability, top-down mission and hierarchical church government.
- Predilection for large congregations that support a 'professional' standard of ministry and exercise influence on local power structures.
- Approaches to evangelism that rely excessively on 'come' rather than 'go' initiatives.
- Thinking the Christian story is still known, understood and widely believed within society.
- Reluctance to conclude Christendom vestiges inoculate rather than evangelise.
- Celebrating survey evidence that 70% of the population claim to be Christian, as if such notional Christianity is significant.

- Assuming churchgoing is a normal social activity and that most people feel comfortable in church buildings and services.
- Attitudes towards church buildings that imply these are focal points of God's presence.
- Orientation towards maintenance rather than mission in ministerial training, congregational focus and financial priorities.
- Proliferation of church activities that are inappropriate and exhausting for marginal communities in a mission context.
- Preferring authoritative pronouncements, preaching and monologue over dialogue, conversation and consensus.
- Pontificating and lecturing, often in a sanctimonious tone that understandably irritates others.
- Discomfort among church leaders if members ask questions or express doubts or disagreement.
- Performance-oriented services and the tendency of short-lived multi-voiced developments to revert to the default mono-voiced position.
- Solemnity, formality and even morbidity when breaking bread and sharing wine in contrast to the joyful and domestic informality of the early churches.
- Despite decades of decline and marginalisation, triumphalist theology and language (especially in our hymnody).
- Consequentialist and utilitarian approaches to ethics, more concerned with outcomes than right motives and means.
- Attitudes to other faith communities that vary from opposition to tolerance but assume Christianity should be accorded centrality and privileges.
- Expectations that imminent revival will restore the fortunes and influence of the churches in society.

Detecting Christendom Toxins

The language of Christendom 'toxins' is used in *Church after Christendom*, so you may want to consult that book too, but the toxic mindset of Christendom is illustrated by the above summary from *Post-Christendom*.

Here is an exercise to help us consider how to regard these attitudes and assumptions, and how to engage with them.

1. Work through the list. Are you convinced that each item represents the legacy of Christendom? Might some be authentically Christian, or unconnected with the issue of Christendom? Place ? beside any items you are not convinced about.
2. Work through the list again. How significant are these items? Place ! beside items you regard as particularly important.
3. Work through the list you have highlighted. Choose 5 of these and put together a proposal for how each of these might be addressed by an individual or a church.
4. Work through the hymnbook or song collection of your own church/denomination. Note down any Christendom toxins you discover.

5. Listen carefully to sermons, prayers and conversations during one month. Note also any books or magazines you read during this month. What Christendom toxins, if any, do you detect? How might you respond to what you discover?

Reading the Bible after Christendom

The fifth book in the 'After Christendom' series will be written by Lloyd Pietersen. This will investigate the influence of the Christendom shift on biblical interpretation and ask how we might read the Bible with fresh perspectives after Christendom.

However, earlier books have already indicated that familiar interpretations of various biblical passages may need to be reconsidered now that Christendom is coming to an end. The influence of power, wealth and status on the church during the Christendom era may have distorted its understanding of many texts. We face the disturbing but exciting challenge of looking afresh at the Bible from our post-Christendom position on the margins of society.

While we wait for Lloyd's book, it might be helpful to ponder a few sample passages, asking whether we have allowed the Christendom mindset to impact the way we have interpreted these. We will concentrate on passages from the Gospels.

Matthew 5:13

1. What are the various ways in which you have heard the term 'salt' interpreted?
2. Which of these have you found most helpful or persuasive?
3. Do any of these interpretations make sense of the term 'earth' (soil, ground)?
4. Do any of these interpretations make sense of the context – the climax of the Beatitudes?
5. Did you know salt was used in ancient times as a fertilizer? Might this make more sense of the verse and its context?
6. Why do you think 'salt as preservative' was a more popular interpretation during the Christendom era than 'salt as fertilizer'?
7. Which makes better sense in post-Christendom?

(NB: for further resources on this passage and its interpretation, see Alan Kreider's article at: <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/admin/node/edit/291>)

Matthew 5:38-42

1. What do the phrases 'turn the other cheek' and 'go the second mile' imply when used today?
2. How is this interpretation good news to oppressed and victimised people?
3. Might our interpretation of this passage be different if we realised 'do not resist' really means 'do not resist violently'?
4. How would our understanding of Jesus' teaching be affected by discovering that:
 - (a) A blow on the 'right cheek' suggests a master disciplining a slave with the back of his hand and turning the other cheek might represent passive resistance?
 - (b) Poor people in first-century Palestine wore only two garments?
 - (c) Roman soldiers could force people in occupied territory to carry their equipment for only one mile and would risk punishment if this went further?
5. What might it mean to behave in such ways today?

(NB: for further resources on this passage and its interpretation, see Walter Wink: *Engaging the Powers*, pp175-193)

Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

1. Within the Christendom church this passage was used to justify a mixed church made up of believers and unbelievers. Is this legitimate?
2. Where does the term 'church' appear in this parable? Can it be inferred?
3. In dissident groups a different interpretation was given. What do you think this was?
4. What do you think is the message of this parable and its contemporary application?
5. Can you think of other biblical passages where the focus is on the kingdom of God (v24) but the Christendom shift identified this with the institutional church?

Matthew 21:33-46

1. Who do you think the various characters in this parable represent?
2. What is the moral and teaching of this parable?
3. Would your interpretation be any different if the word translated 'landowner' was instead translated 'mafia boss'?
4. Would your interpretation be any different if you knew that absentee landlords who extorted income from peasant farmers with threats of violence were deeply resented and sometimes violence was met with violence?
5. Is it possible that the son who is killed does not represent Jesus?
6. What, then, would be the point of this parable? Might Jesus be proposing another way that challenges the violence on both sides?
7. How does this parable equip followers of Jesus for mission today?

Mark 12:41-44

1. Is this incident simply about the extraordinary generosity of a poor widow?
2. What difference, if any, do the verses (38-40) immediately before this passage make?

3. What difference, if any, do the verses (13:1-2) immediately after this passage make?
4. Why are the political, social and economic implications of this passage rarely mentioned in sermons today?
5. How does this parable equip followers of Jesus for mission today?

Luke 1:1-2:40

1. Read carefully through Luke's account of the birth of Jesus.
2. During the Christendom era most people assumed God worked from the top down rather than from the margins. In this passage how many instances can you find of God working from the margins?
3. You might want to make a similar list from Matthew's account (1:18-2:23).
4. What political implications of the coming of Jesus do you detect in the story (note especially the songs of Mary and Zechariah and the comments of Simeon)?
5. What is the significance of 'peace' in this story? Note the various references to this word.

Luke 18:18-30

1. With which character in this passage do we generally identify? Or do we detect only one character apart from Jesus?
2. What do we understand as the good news in this passage?
3. What happens if we identify, not with the rich ruler, but with 'the poor' (v22) to whom his treasures are to be distributed?
4. What would Jesus' hearers likely have assumed about the reason why this ruler was rich, despite living in occupied territory?
5. How does the conversation between Jesus and Peter (vv28-30) affect the way we interpret this incident?
6. Is there any support in this passage for the frequent distinction made between our actions and our attitudes in relation to our possessions?

Luke 19:11-27

1. Who is the hero in this parable and who is the villain?
2. What kind of behaviour is this parable advocating?
3. Is it possible that the king is not Jesus or God? What sort of character is he?
4. What difference would it make to your interpretation if you knew that the hated Archelaus, a Herodian puppet king, had recently rushed off to Rome to be confirmed as ruler of the Jews (contrary to popular demands against this)?
5. What difference does the context make (the encounter with Zacchaeus in verses 1-10 and the entry into Jerusalem and clearing of the temple in verses 28-48)?
6. What is Jesus trying to communicate about the nature of God's kingdom (v11)?
7. How does this parable equip followers of Jesus for mission today?

Church after Christendom: A thumbnail sketch

The basic argument of the book can be summed up in the following steps:

Part One: Shape: Prologue

- The first section of the book explores the shapes church after Christendom might need to take in a changing culture.
- The core biblical text for this section is Acts 11:1-18, in which the early church grappled with a profound paradigm shift.

Chapter 1: Church after Christendom: Belonging/Believing/Behaving

- As Christendom gradually disintegrates, the relationship between believing and belonging is unravelling in various ways.
- Beyond the churches there are various degrees of alienation from the church and its message.
- Understanding the complexity of this relationship is important for mission and church life.
- An additional factor is behaving, which raises questions about the meaning of conversion, baptism and membership.
- Centred set churches are becoming popular but these require a strong core as well as open edges.

Chapter 2: Church after Christendom: Comings and Goings

- As Christendom fades, it is helpful to understand why people are leaving and joining churches in a changing culture.
- There is considerable research available on church leavers, which needs to be examined critically in order to understand the various factors involved.
- How churches respond to church leavers is important, both for the well-being of the leavers and for the churches themselves.
- Listening to the concerns of church leavers can reveal key issues for churches to address in order to be more attractive and authentic.
- Understanding why people join churches is important both for mission and for reflection on church life.
- Cross-referencing lessons from leavers and joiners focuses attention on some critical issues for healthy church life.

Chapter 3: Church after Christendom: Will it Emerge?

- The demise of Christendom has been accompanied by both fragmentation of the church and a search for unity.
- During the late 1990s, a new wave of churches began to emerge, prompting some to suggest church after Christendom will emerge rather than evolving.
- Although categorising emerging churches at this stage is risky and inexact, a threefold division into mission-led, community-led and worship-led may be helpful.
- Different expressions of emerging church interact in different ways with the post-Christendom agenda.

Chapter 4: Church after Christendom: Will it Evolve?

- Some regard emerging churches as less promising, suggesting that church after Christendom is more likely to evolve from inherited forms of church.
- It may be that the strongest hope consists in partnership and mutual learning between inherited and emerging churches.
- All churches are in some senses both inherited and emerging; conversations can help various kinds of churches draw on each other's resources.
- The global dimension is also important, as inherited and emerging churches learn from churches elsewhere and from missionaries and ethnically diverse churches in Europe.
- But what evolves or emerges must be about the ethos of the church, not just its style or shape.

Part Two: Ethos: Prologue

- The second section of the book explores the ethos church after Christendom might need to develop in a changing culture.
- Perspectives from both inherited and emerging churches (and church leavers) should inform this discussion.
- The core biblical text for this section is Ephesians 4:1-16, which offers a glorious vision of a healthy and participative church.

Chapter 5: Church after Christendom: Mission

- Church after Christendom will need to make a decisive shift from maintenance to mission in its basic orientation.
- This will involve action at a translocal as well as congregational level, so that institutions take on aspects of being missionary movements.
- Denominations, training institutions and other agencies need to move beyond missional language to substantive changes.
- The centre of post-Christendom society is contested, with competing claims being made for secularity and spirituality.
- Church after Christendom must embrace its marginality and develop strategies appropriate to mission from the margins.
- This will involve rehabilitating and reconfiguring evangelism.

Chapter 6: Church after Christendom: Community

- Interest in church growth has in recent years partly been superseded by concern for church health.
- Church after Christendom needs to identify the Christendom toxins and flush these out of its system.
- Induction processes and ongoing training is needed to build healthy churches.
- The neglected and maligned practice of church discipline is crucial if honest and loving communities are to evolve and emerge.
- Interactive and fully participative church life builds healthy and harmonious communities.

- Leadership models need to be reassessed and reconfigured in church after Christendom.

Chapter 7: Church after Christendom: Worship

- During the Christendom era, worship predominated over both community and mission, but these elements need to be re-balanced in post-Christendom.
- Emerging churches offer fresh and instructive perspectives on worship.
- Some are proposing that gathering together becomes less important, but this is unwise in post-Christendom.
- Inherited churches offer rich resources and long experience that church after Christendom will need to draw on and rework.

Chapter 8: Church after Christendom: Simple and Sustainable

- Church after Christendom must be both sustaining of Christians in emerging culture and also sustainable.
- Questions need to be asked about the focus, frequency and extent of church activities.
- Church after Christendom must be simple, but not simplistic, and capable of sustaining hope.

Church after Christendom: Some Questions

1. In what way can people belong before they believe in your church?
2. What are your church's core values and how do you sustain these?
3. How do you engage creatively with those who leave your church?
4. What are you doing to encourage conversations between emerging and evolving churches?
5. In what ways can your church become more truly missional?
6. How do you induct new people into your church?
7. What practices in your church sustain healthy community life?
8. What activities in your church might you do less often or stop doing?
9. When you change the shape or style of your church, how do you engage with the question of its ethos?
10. What five things might your church do in response to the issues raised in this book?