Gestalt of patience
Alan Kreider

Until recently, I had not known that patience was at the heart of the life of pre-
Constantinian Christians. But in the past two years it has become clear to me how
important patience was in their lives. In the course of writing a book on the growth of the
early Christians I have read as many early Christian writings as possible. To my surprise,
patience figures large in these writings. According to Tertullian, patience is “the highest
virtue”; according to Lactantius it is “the greatest of all virtues;” according to Origen,
patience is the “virtue peculiarly ours.” Through conversion, according to Cyprian, “the
patience of God” lives in Christians and makes them Christ-like.

According to these writers, patience is following Jesus and living what he teaches. As
such, it is at the heart of the Christians’ missional and social strategy. It governs their
behavior at work; it shapes the way in which they relate to each other and outsiders; it
determines the spirit in which they resist injustice. In their understanding, patience is not
limp; it does not passively acquiesce to evil. Patience strongly resists evil by rejecting the
compulsion to control things that closes off possibilities. In Tertullian’s view (*On
Patience* 10.8), impatience makes violence inevitable. “Now, nothing undertaken through
impatience can be transacted without violence, and everything done with violence has
either met with no success or has collapsed or has plunged to its own destruction.”

Patience, in contrast, collaborates with God by living in hope, as believers trust God who
is bringing the Kingdom, and as they follow Jesus faithfully. The early Christians did not
write treatises about evangelism; they wrote treatises—three of them—on patience. And
despite disincentives and persecutions, their numbers grew. In the Christians’ patient
lifestyle there was an inner energy (I call it a “ferment”) that outsiders were drawn to as a
sign of God’s power and presence. This has given me my title: *Patient Ferment: the
Growth of the Church in the Roman Empire*, which Baker Academic will publish in the
fall of 2015. As a foretaste of it I offer a “Gestalt of patience” that summarizes the early
Christian teachings on patience.

- Patience is an expression of God’s character: God is patient, and is working
  inexorably across the centuries to bring the Kingdom. In the fullness of time God
disclosed himself perfectly in Jesus Christ.

- The incarnation of Jesus Christ reveals the essence of patience: Jesus’ life and
teaching demonstrate what patience means and beckon those who follow him to
live a lifestyle of patience that participates in God’s mission.

- Patience is being out of control: people who live by a patient lifestyle trust God
  and do not try to manipulate outcomes; we live incautiously, riskily.

- Patience is being unhurried: patient Christians live at the pace given by God,
accepting incompleteness and waiting.
• Patience is being unconventional: it reconfigures behavior according to Jesus’ teachings in many areas, especially wealth, sex, and power.

• Patience is being non-violent: it accepts injury without retaliating in kind, because violence is not God’s calling to us and cannot bring fundamental change.

• Patience gives religious freedom: it does not compel religious beliefs and observances.

• Patience is hopeful: it entrusts the future confidently to God.

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