

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 16

Church Growth

While our church family takes three weeks for all classes to focus on sharing Jesus without fear, we seize this time to focus on the causes for early church growth as a means of introducing our church-wide evangelism emphasis.

The early church did not grow by chance. Nor did it grow by silence of the believers. The church grew, as the church does today, by the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing the good news of our salvation to the hearts and minds of the unbeliever. The Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, who gave his life as a ransom for sinners. Before Jesus died, he spoke to his Apostles the words of John 14-16, in which he prophesied and promised the Holy Spirit would come. Jesus was specific that the Spirit would bear witness to him. “The Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me” (Jn 15:26).

That is indeed the work of the Holy Spirit, to “convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment” (Jn 16:8). The Spirit brings “glory” to Jesus “by taking what is mine [Jesus] and making it known to you” (Jn 16:14).

The growth of the church, then, is the story of the Holy Spirit working among humanity. We are remiss, however, if we leave out a key to the work of the Holy Spirit. The key is found in the very same passages. In John 15, after Jesus said the Spirit “will testify about me,” Jesus immediately adds, “and you also must testify” (Jn 15:27). In other words, evangelism is the work of the Holy Spirit; witnessing is the work of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit does this work through followers of Christ.

This truth is seen throughout our New Testament. Jesus gave the parting instructions to his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19).

Paul would put it this way: in the church, we are all parts of the “body” of Christ (1 Cor. 12). In this body, we all have a manifestation or gift of the Holy Spirit. That gift, though, is for the church, the “common good” (12:7). As the body of Christ, we do the works of Christ. We are his hands, his feet, and his mouth. Not all have the same gift, and not all have the same role in God’s evangelism. But all have a gifting for the common good. All have this from God. A natural part of living a truthful life is recognition of God as our source and meaning. Therefore, it is only right and natural that we should openly speak of who gives us meaning and purpose, and of whom we rely on for our today and tomorrow.

This was the experience of the early church. Some were actual missionaries, sent out to take the good news to foreign people. These were, however, not the majority of the Christians. Far more were called to live lives that proclaimed the good news in every day ways to every day people.

The thrust of the early Christians' evangelism was a natural outflow of a changed life dependent upon God. The church was not out to grab converts! The church was following the instructions of the Messiah, telling the good news as God gave the chance and opportunity. This was not an in-your-face accept it or roast-in-hell lifestyle. To the contrary, it was one of love and compassion. The proclamation of the good news was a natural outflow of obedience to Christ as a witness. It was sowing of seed. The church's role was not to get the conversions. That was and is the role of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit convicts hearts and minds; the church merely delivers the message.

Jesus recognized, and the early church understood, that each follower of Christ is a witness to some degree or another. In a real sense, it is merely a question of what kind of witness the believer will be. Will the believer be a light that shines from a hill at night? Or, will the witness be one of shame and silence about the Lord?

The early church grew from a handful of low status, little influence, uneducated, Jewish fishermen in a back-water country of the Roman Empire into a huge economic and social institution that went from end to end of the Roman Empire by 200 A.D. How did the church do this? How did God do this? What was it that made Christianity not just flourish, but grow with an unbelievable speed? That is our focus this week.

EARLY CHURCH GROWTH

Was it Paul? Maybe Peter? Was it a group of people, say the 12 apostles? Who had the "gift of evangelism?" Who were the ones that brought such growth?

It certainly was NOT the attraction of the church in society's eyes. For this was not a time where it was socially acceptable to be a Christian. As we have already studied, those who put their faith in Jesus were frequently targeted not just for persecution, but also even for death. In fact, as we saw in our "Martyr" lesson, the word martyr itself is an English version of the Greek word meaning "witness." Yet in spite of this persecution, at the hand of the state as well as individuals, more and more came to faith. People overcame their fears of speaking about the most important thing in their lives -- Jesus.

It certainly was NOT a big publicity campaign! Publicity was dangerous! It could cause persecution and death.

It certainly was NOT big, beautiful church buildings. The earliest church met in homes. Gradually, many of these homes were expanded into the earliest church buildings, but those buildings were extremely limited and inconspicuous for the first 300 years of the church.

It was actually the simple words and deeds of ordinary Christians used by God in extraordinary ways that brought about the amazing growth of the church. As Christians spoke, more and more came to faith, and as those words were accompanied with actions, the results were astonishing.

How did the early Christians overcome fear issues and share their faith at a time of great persecution? We have a window into their thoughts and actions through writings of the early church fathers as well as secular writings that commented on the early believers. Let us consider how the early Christians stood out in their passion, prayer, partnership, power, and preparation.

PASSION

The early Christians had an absolute conviction that Jesus Christ conquered death, both in his own body and for those who believed in him. Without this confidence, early Christianity would make no sense for anyone. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile” and “we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Cor. 15:17, 19).

Paul is quick to add, “but Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). And this conviction, of which Paul and hundreds of others were eyewitnesses, moved Paul to live “in victory” (1 Cor. 15:57). With deep conviction and passion, Paul could urge others to “stand firm” and “let nothing move you” because our God has conquered death and removed its sting, setting men free from sin’s grip. Paul and others would “always give [themselves] fully to the work of the Lord, because” that “labor is not in vain.”

Paul had passion, and the early church had nothing less! Countless Christians would give their very lives for their convictions. We spent several weeks looking at some of the martyrs of the early church. The effect of the martyrdoms was huge on evangelism. In the early third century, Tertullian would write that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. Tertullian put into words the effect of the passion and conviction of Christians among the world. As the lost saw that people would willingly and peaceably give up their lives for a simple belief and trust in Jesus, they were drawn to Him also.

And, this is no surprise. Many of the lost live in fear of death. Many live in guilt and distress over life. Many go through the motions of life without purpose or direction. When they see someone who has passion in his life, a passion that brings peace in life and death, it is noticed!

This was not a hidden passion. The early church persecution in Asia Minor in the second century caused Christians to come out in mass and march before a provincial governor's home to protest the injustice and show the depth of their faith. With actions like these, we see a passion that clearly overcame any fears about speaking out! The point of these actions and passion was not to get more "converts." Although the church was ecstatic when even one would come to faith, the church saw this as the Holy Spirit's work. The role of the Christian was to be real and faithful; speaking and living as God gave the opportunity, and trusting God with the consequences.

PRAYER

The early church were composed of people of prayer. No doubt this had a profound effect on their walk. No doubt it aided their overcoming of any fear issues associated with living or sharing their faith.

The *Didache*, which we covered several months ago, was an early church training manual for new Christians. In it, we saw that the early Christians would pause at least three times a day to recite the Lord's Prayer. This prayer was not some magical formula that merely needed vocalizing. Rather, it was said as a true petition before a listening God. While we say it in King James formal English, the original prayer was very ordinary every day-speak. We say, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done in heaven as it is on earth. Give us this day, our daily bread and forgive us our debts (trespasses); as we forgive our debtors (those who trespass against us). And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen."

For them, they would reflect and pray three times a day. "Our heavenly Father. You are holy in your person and your actions. We pray that your church will grow on earth and that it will finally be united with you in heaven. Please make sure we have the things we need today, including not just food, but forgiveness for our sins. Knowing your forgiveness, we also forgive those who have wronged us. Father, please protect us spiritually. We live for you. You are all powerful. You alone are worthy of our praise. Amen."

Now, saying that prayer with conviction and thought three times a day will help conquer any fear or obstacle that Satan might use to inhibit our growth!

PARTNERSHIP

As mentioned above, the early church did not see conversion of the masses as their responsibility. They saw it as the work of God, and the role of man was to partner with God in that work. This was done in part with words, but even more so with deeds. The actions of the early Christians were profoundly different from actions of the lost. That difference was because of partnership with God.

Around 180 A.D., one of Christianity's most vocal critics was a pagan writer named Celsus. Celsus was quick to point out the uniqueness of the Christian fellowship. There was a social bonding among the Christians that differed greatly from normal life.

"Social bonding" is almost too weak a description for the actions of the early church that drew attention. Christians had charity for each other in measures not seen in the world. Tertullian reported on the pagan comment, "See how these Christians love one another." Jesus foretold this love as the way in which Christians would be recognized. Jesus told his followers, "A new command I give you: Love one another...By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:34-35).

And, Jesus was right! Church historian Henry Chadwick writes, "The practical application of charity [love] was probably the single most potent cause of Christian success."¹ Chadwick then points out multiple areas where the Christians' love was stunning in its actions.

Christians took care of the poor. In a time and in a society where there was no governmental assistance or social security for those in need, the church stepped up and provided the care. The poor, the widows, and the orphans all had help from followers of Christ.

In fact, the primary responsibility for the early church treasury was to provide for the poor. Chadwick cites that by the year 251, the records indicate that the church at Rome had grown so much it supported its "bishop, 46 presbyters, 7 deacons, subdeacons, 42 acolytes, and 52 exorcists, readers and doorkeepers" along with "1500 widows and needy persons, all of whom were 'fed by the grace and kindness of the Lord'" (*Id.* at 58, 59).

This is even more stunning when we remember that the church was an illegal institution subject to the death penalty.

¹ Chadwick, *The Early Church*, (Dorset Press, 1967).

POWER

The church did not grow, and people did not overcome fear, merely from these good deeds. The early Christians had power! Great power! Now, this was not a power in the social or governmental structures of the world, nor are we talking about great personal, physical strength. This was not even great miracle working power. This was the greatest power of all – the power of the gospel.

For the early church had in the gospel, an answer to those hurting. There was a real solace in God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, a balm for human pain. For those without purpose, there was divine direction in the gospel. For those without security or peace, there was a peace that passed understanding. There was a confidence of eternity with God.

For those plumbing the depths of human philosophy for happiness or contentment, there was a solid answer. More than merely feeling happy, a deep joy was present. Christianity had the power of giving the outcast a home. Women, who were trampled by society, had equal standing before God in his kingdom. Slaves likewise were treated as equals, for indeed they were! In Christ, there was neither male nor female, neither slave nor free. All were of the same Spirit and set for the same destiny.

This power was tremendous in its effects. Consider how it is today...true answers of peace, meaning, joy, forgiveness, holiness, and eternal security...who wouldn't readily embrace that? That is the power of the gospel message, and there is no greater power on earth today.

PREPARATION

In his first epistle, Peter wrote that the Christians were to “always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15). That involves preparation!

The church got that preparation meeting together regularly, studying together, and living lives consistent with their teaching. We have seen over the last 14 lessons the study and the fellowship that saw the church grow rapidly. In fact, most of the writings we have studied and used thus far in this class are themselves “preparation” writings. These were documents and letters to help people understand not only the faith we share but also the practical ramifications of that faith.

The early church prepared and fought for the truth of their faith everywhere heresy and unbelief raised its head. Early Christians even wrote the Emperor himself in pleas for understanding and in defense of their faith. We saw this in our class on the early apologists.

POINTS FOR HOME

So, where does this leave us as we start a three-week emphasis on sharing our faith? We can easily see, I hope, how these same five factors apply to us. With the overriding recognition that God is the evangelist, the Holy Spirit the converter, we can boldly (yet with “gentleness” and “reverence”) never fear to speak about who we are and why we are the way we are.

1. Passion. We should have the passion of the early church. We worship a true redeemer. We have answers to life’s problems, and we have eternal destiny. We have purpose. We have secure love. That is worth being passionate about!

2. Prayer. We need to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes. 5:17). With a constant dialogue with God, we should be ever watchful for God’s opportunities for us to speak or show the love of God to those around us.

3. Partnership. We are God’s hands and feet. We must show the love that he has given us. That is the key that Jesus selected as the means by which people will know we are His. Jesus is present on earth, but we are his body, so what people see in us, is the vision of Jesus they will have.

4. Power. When we see those hurting, guilty, listless, anxious and worried, lonely, we must remember we hold the gospel message with power to meet their needs! And the gospel meets those needs like nothing else! That is the beauty of God’s work and we can bring that to those in need!

We have our work cut out for us here. For many, Christianity has become associated with harsh judgmentalism, with “holier than thou” attitudes, and with political parties rather than the faith of loving creatures basking in the life given by a loving God. Actions must accompany our words to overcome this stereotyping!

5. Preparation. Not a bad word – preparation is fun! It is study, it is fellowship, and it is more! It is growing before God ourselves. It is learning the power we set out above firsthand!

As we walk in these areas, we will see God use us as never before! Come back next week as Scott helps us “prepare!”