

Evangelism in the Early Church

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The primary mission of the Christian Church is to preach the gospel to all nations, it is to win souls for Christ. The fact that there are approximately one billion at least nominal Christians in the world indicates that Christ's Great Commission has been at least partially carried out. This monograph will research how and by whom was the Great Commission enacted in the "early days" of the Christian church, during its first four centuries (100-500 A.D.) This research paper will not contribute creatively to the study of theology or methods of evangelism, but it will rather compile from a representative bibliography facts concerning evangelism in the early Church. Granted, research on this topic has been undertaken before by individuals with far greater academic credentials than the writer of these lines. But this monograph will attempt to condense the vast amount of material written on this topic into a monograph on evangelism in the early Church which is long enough to adequately cover the subject but still short enough to be interesting. This essay will approach the topic by asking the basic questions, why?, what?, who?, to whom?, and how?ⁱ When possible, primary sources from the early Church fathers will be quoted in translation. The ultimate objective will be to bring to light the evangelism methods used by Christians of the early Church which can be used effectively to spread the kingdom of God in the twentieth century.

Why did the early Church evangelize unbelievers, beginning at Pentecost? Was it out of obedience to Christ's Great Commission, out of gratitude and love for the Savior, or out of concern for men's souls? While all these reasons are partially true, William Weinrich of Concordia Seminary, Fort Wayne, states that the early Church evangelized because it could not do otherwise.ⁱⁱ The stars have been shining for over six millenium. They have been able to do so because they are continually connected to power sources, burning luminous gases. The Holy Spirit was the connecting power source to the early Christian Church as he is to the Church today. In Acts 1:8, the Lord Jesus spoke about receiving this power source to his eleven disciples, prior to his ascension. It was this power source that gave the apostles the courage, strength, and ability to build the Christian Church, beginning on Pentecost.ⁱⁱⁱ

What did these men preach? The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The early Church evangelized the gospel, the good news of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ. Michael Green writes in his comprehensive monograph:

Christianity burst on the world with all the suddenness of good news: Good news proclaimed with great enthusiasm and courage by its advocates, and backed up by their own experience. It was the fruit of their conviction that God had transformed the apparent defeat of Good Friday into the supreme victory of Easter...The gospel is good news; it is proclamation; it is witness.^{iv}

Not to be overlooked in why the early Church evangelized unbelievers are the more human reasons why the gospel advanced from Jerusalem to Antioch, Rome, and beyond. Humanly speaking, the most obvious and significant motivating force in evangelizing was the Christians' gratitude to God for eternal salvation. Milton L. Rudnick writes in his book, *Speaking the Gospel Through the Ages: A History of Evangelism*:

"...the early Christians were characterized by a compelling desire to offer others the incomparable blessing they had received through faith in Jesus Christ. What they had was simply too good to keep quiet about, too good to keep to themselves. Certainly part of

their motivation in sharing the Gospel was simply the natural delight related to bringing any kind of good news to others. It is rewarding to put smiles on people's faces and joy into people's hearts. The Good News of Christ, when believed, had that effect. The most prominent and compelling aspect of their motivation to evangelize was a high sense of privilege about this activity.^v

Rudnick makes an interesting point in stating that there is virtually no mention of any exhortations or commands to spread the gospel of Christ in early Christian literature. Rudnick presents two possible explanations:

- 1) The impulse to spread the gospel was not considered important.
- 2) The impulse to spread the gospel was so strong and active, no encouragement was needed.^{vi}

Considering how Christianity spread and grew so rapidly, it is evident that the latter view is correct. Rudnick: "During these early centuries Christianity grew so rapidly that the chief agents of growth were, not the leaders of the church nor professional evangelists, but rather ordinary believers who shared the Gospel in the roles and relationships of their daily lives."^{vii}

Another compelling reason to share the gospel among the early Christians was simply love. Love for God and their fellowman. Rudnick: "The root of this sense of privilege about evangelizing was love—love for God and for the lost, based on His seeking and saving love for all."^{viii}

Perhaps one can delineate another reason why the early Christians were so zealous to evangelize the heathen. The early Church in general was constantly reminded and most likely constantly believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent. This certainly added an impetus to spread the gospel. This motivating force included a number of factors, love for those who might otherwise be lost, fear of eternal punishment for those who did not evangelize and confess their faith, and finally the hope of an eternal reward. Clement of Alexandria spoke of all these factors when he wrote: "Do you not fear, and hasten to learn from Him—that is, hasten to salvation—dreading wrath, loving grace, eagerly striving after the hope set before us, that you may shun the judgment threatened?" (Protrep 9)^{ix}

Christ commanded that his gospel be preached to every creature. Human beings were his instruments in spreading that gospel. What was truly unique about evangelism in the early Church was that every Christian considered it his/her privilege and duty to evangelize. Weinrich: "Witnessing to the Gospel was not the work just of professional, full-time missionaries...all Christians were taken up into the missionary endeavor."^x

The apostles were the first to receive the command to spread the gospel. Today only the written tradition of the early Church gives us any hint of the apostles' missionary activities. Eusebius tells us a tradition that the apostles drew lots to decide who went where.^{xi} Only the apostle Paul's missionary activities are anywhere near being documented. Justin summed up the mission of the apostles by writing: "From Jerusalem there went out twelve men into the world; they were unlearned and had no ability in speaking; yet by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the Word of God."^{xii}

After the apostles inherited their eternal reward, other Christians were left to carry out their work. Weinrich first mentions a group of workers he calls "wandering missionaries." He writes:

Especially in the first and second centuries there were missionaries who believed themselves called by God to the task of evangelism but who do not seem to have been

connected with any one congregation. These roving preachers did not stay long in any one place and usually were supported by gifts from host congregations.^{xiii}

The method of these wandering missionaries is reminiscent of the mission endeavors of the apostle Paul. As Paul would travel from town to town preaching the gospel, establishing congregations, and then move on, so these later missionaries followed the same operation. Eusebius writes concerning them: "In foreign lands they simply laid the foundations of the faith. That done, they appointed others as shepherds, entrusting them with care of the new growth, while they themselves proceeded with the grace and co-operation of God to other countries and other peoples."^{xiv}

In addition to wandering or itinerant ministers of the gospel, the developing office of the local parish pastor also engaged in the work of evangelism.^{xv} The epistles of the apostle Paul are full of exhortations to bishops and elders to build up the body of Christ. Granted, these exhortations first applied to internal growth of the local congregation, but the rapid spread of Christianity clearly indicated that external growth was not neglected either. Several of the early Church fathers were fine examples of local ministers of the gospel. Ignatius once wrote to Polycarp: "I exhort you, press on in your course, and exhort all men that they might be saved."^{xvi} Even Polycarp's persecutors admitted in their own perverse way that he was an effective evangelist. The church father Irenaeus was quite active in evangelizing the Celts in Southern Gaul.^{xvii} The office of the parish pastor was slowly taking shape.

Early Christianity was bitterly attacked on many sides by the pagan world. The early Christian Church had its own philosophers and theologians who defended the faith as well as evangelized the heathen. These included men like Pantaeus, Justin Martyr, Minucius Felix, Tatian, and others. It was their intent to deal and argue with pagan philosophers on their own ground. Green apply sums up their intentions by writing:

It would be a mistake to think that the apologists and theologians were anything less than evangelists. The objective of their lives was to bring men of all sorts and intellectual abilities to the truth about God, man, and the universe as it was revealed in Jesus Christ.^{xviii}

But by far the most important segment of the Christian populace who participated in evangelism were the simple lay people. Adolf von Harnack deals at length with this concept in his monograph: *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*. Harnack especially maintains that the early Christians' forbearance under persecution acted as a significant drawing card:

The most numerous and successful missionaries of the Christian religion were not the regular teachers but Christians themselves, in virtue of their loyalty and courage. How little we hear of the former and their results! How much we hear of the effects produced by the latter! Above, all, every confessor and martyr was a missionary; he not merely confirmed the faith of those who were already won, but also enlisted new members by his testimony and his death... While they lay in prison, while they stood before the judges, on the road to execution itself, they won people for the faith.^{xix}

Walter Oetting also writes that much of the evangelism work in the early Church was done by common laymen and laywomen who took time to share their faith with others:

When the early Christians themselves recount how they learned of the Gospel, they usually confess their faith was the result of casual contact with that 'way of life' ... Gregory came to study in Caesarea and happened to find a Christian teacher. Minucius Felix described how Octavius told Caecilius about his Christianity in casual

conversation. Justin Martyr was accosted by an old man along the seashore who explained the Old Testament to him. Justin recalled that he was converted to the faith when he saw people willing to die for it in the area. The pagan Celsus scoffed at the workers in wool and leather, the rustic and ignorant persons who spread Christianity. The work was not by people who called themselves missionaries, but by rank-and-file members. The least among men, even the unknown, are indeed the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.^{xx}

The early lay Christians evangelized because they could do nothing else. They were compelled to tell others about “the Way” because of their love for God and their fellowman. The pagan Celsus’ comments may have been bitter and sarcastic, but they unwittingly testify to the joy of the early Christians in sharing their faith. Green makes an interesting point when he compares the evangelistic methods of the early Christians with the methods of gospel outreach employed today:

All of this makes it abundantly clear that in contrast to the present day, when Christianity is highly intellectualized and dispensed by a professional to a constituency increasingly confined to the middle class, in the early days the faith was spontaneously spread by informal evangelists, and had its greatest appeal among the working classes.^{xxi}

Before leaving the “who” portion of this monograph, a few words most definitely need to be said about the role of women in evangelizing the pagan Roman world. As any veteran pastor can testify, women on the whole put men to shame when it comes to attending church and serving their Lord in various organizations in a local congregation. One gets a hint of a similar situation existing in the early Church. It were women, not men, who cared enough to finish embalming the dead body of Jesus, only to be rewarded with the privilege of being the first people to see the risen Christ. Throughout the book of Acts, women play a prominent role. Dorcas, Lydia, Priscilla, the four prophesying daughters of Philip, the upper-class women of Berea and Thessalonica as to name a few.^{xxii} While little is extant in early Christian literature about women publicly preaching the Word, Green and Harnack especially point out that the dedication of Christian women in the face of martyrdom could not but help make a deep and lasting impression on both their persecutors and the unbelieving world in general. The two most notable examples of Christian women martyrs are Perpetua (d. 203 A.D.) and Blandina (d. 177 A.D.) Green: “If women like this were at all typical throughout the varied social strata of the Church, it is hardly surprising that the gospel overcame the enormous obstacles in its way, and began to capture the Roman Empire.”^{xxiii}

While it has been established that the early Christians were extremely zealous in spreading the Christian faith, who exactly did they target as the most promising evangelizing prospects? Christian converts came from all classes of society and from many different occupations, excluding those trades which could or did compromise the Christian faith: prostitution, racing chariot drivers, actors, priests of a pagan temple, astrologers, sculptors, artisans, and for a while, soldiers.^{xxiv} The book of Acts and the epistles of Paul list several people who had prominent professional positions who became Christians, Cornelius, Luke, Erastus, Lydia, and Sergius Paulus to name a few.^{xxv}

Christianity however was especially successful among the lower classes in the Roman world. J. G. Davies writes: “Christianity was indeed at first a working class movement, and hence Paul’s statement: ‘Behold your calling, brethren, how that not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.’^{xxvi} The pagan Celsus ridiculed the low estate of the early Christians. Philip Schaff writes:

The Jewish origin of Christianity also, and the poverty and obscurity of a majority of its professors particularly offended the pride of the Greeks and Romans. Celsus, exaggerating this fact, and ignoring the many exceptions, scoffingly remarked that ‘weavers, cobblers, and fullers, the most illiterate persons,’ preached the ‘irrational faith,’ and knew how to commend it especially ‘to women and children.’^{xxvii}

There is much evidence, however, that as the years went by, more and more of the upper social strata became attracted to Christianity. Both secular and ecclesiastical literature of the time period indicate that Christians were found among the imperial household, among the senatorial and equestrian orders, and even in some cases, among the relatives of the emperor.^{xxviii} Weinrich reports that even the Roman legions had their professing Christians among them.^{xxix} By the end of the second century, Tertullian could write: “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, palace, senate, forum—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods.”^{xxx}

The final point concerning evangelism in the early Church that will be examined in this monograph will be the “how,” of evangelism in the early Church, the strategy and methods employed in outreach to the unbelieving community.

There is no reliable written record that the apostles of Christ ever sat down and planned out an elaborate mission strategy to evangelize the entire Roman world. Rudnick makes a valid point: “In a way the evangelizing of the Roman world just happened as Christians shared their faith wherever they happened to be.”^{xxxi} Of all the sources consulted, Rudnick provides the best summary of the evangelistic methods of the apostolic and early post-apostolic age:

...as we examine the evangelistic activities and ventures reported in Acts, we do observe certain consistent patterns: (1) They concentrated their efforts on major centers of influence, the great cities of the empire (Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Alexandria, and Rome, for example). (2) In virtually every location they began their outreach with those who were best to be prepared for their message—the Jewish religious community and those Gentiles who were drawn to Judaism. Apparently they expected the faith to spread from these centers to the outlying areas by means of the established channels of transportation and communication. (3) They gave immediate ownership and responsibility to the new believers, expecting them to keep the faith going and growing in their midst under their new leadership. (4) The evangelists kept in touch with their new churches by means of letters, messengers, and personal visits and put these churches in touch with one another. The purpose of these contacts was to supply encouragement, nurture, guidance, and correction as needed, as well as to maintain a sense of the whole body of Christ.^{xxxii}

E. Glenn Hinson in his book *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire* points out that by the second century the organized clergy began to take the lead in establishing Christian churches.^{xxxiii} He outlines four distinct patterns of operation:

- 1) Sometimes a bishop or group of bishops consecrated another bishop and sent him to evangelize and to organize a group of Christians.
- 2) Sometimes a bishop sent presbyters or deacons to organize a Christian community.
- 3) Sometimes the bishop or bishops nearest at hand gathered with an already existing congregation and instructed them until they could elect a bishop or presbyter who would be consecrated or ordained to complete the constitution of the church.
- 4) Sometimes a bishop himself evangelized and instructed converts until he had prepared a suitable candidate or candidate to carry on after him.^{xxxiv}

Gospel outreach to the heathen community was bold and aggressive as long as there was little persecution, during persecution it was done more “under wraps.”^{xxxv} Hinson writes in the last half of the third century the Church became more and more structured and organized. The conversion of the emperor Constantine marked a major turning point in church history. The Christian church then began a formal and organized effort to spread the faith, this under the protection of the Roman government.^{xxxvi} Hinson writes: “The expansion of the church under these favorable conditions entailed considerable attention to organization, the object of which was systematically to place churches in every nook and cranny of the Empire and to avoid neglecting the smaller villages and out-of-the-way places.”^{xxxvii}

There were various methods employed in the actual process of getting the gospel across to the heathen. Obviously, public proclamation of the Word, whether in a synagogue or an open market place, was the most basic way.^{xxxviii} On a more personal level, a Christian’s individual testimony about his/her faith to an unbeliever often proved very effective. This method has already been noted several times before.

Perhaps, however, what first caught the attention of unbelievers to the early Christians were the believers’ high moral standards and their blameless lives.^{xxxix} In a Roman world full of every kind of lewd and immoral behavior, Christians were not hard to pick out, simply because their lifestyles made them be noticed. There was something about their fellowship they shared with one another, something about their clean moral standards, something about their joy and endurance even when they were horribly persecuted, which attracted unbelievers to the Christian faith.^{xl} In short, the early Christians made their lifestyle a large part of their evangelistic outreach. Christians simply by the way they acted, made unbelievers want to inquire about what made them tick.

Other methods can briefly be mentioned. The work of the Christian apologists can also be listed as a method of evangelism in the early Church. Weinrich: “God intends to convert the mind as well as the heart and body, and therefore apologetic, argumentation, and dialogue were important instruments in the early Church’s missionary endeavors.”^{xli}

Another effective way of exposing the heathen to the practice of Christian love was through charitable activities. These ranged from alms giving, support of widows and orphans, and care for the sick and infirm, to helping the unemployed, caring for slaves, and providing burial services to the poor.^{xlii} Weinrich comments in his journal article that “active charity is the very ‘stuff’ of the Christian life, and with great probability works of charity provided the early Church its best opportunities for mission.”^{xliii} Tertullian: “But is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. ‘See,’ they say, ‘how they love one another.’”^{xliv}

In conclusion, the reason the gospel spread far and wide throughout the Roman empire is because it was connected to a power source, the Holy Spirit. He caused the Word to spread and bear abundant fruit. But if one speaks of the spread of the gospel in human terms, one can say that the success of evangelizing much of the Roman empire was due to the fact that Christians were simply compelled to talk about the hope that was in them. It was their natural reaction, it was simply part of their lifestyle. The most important point the Christian Church today can learn from the evangelism methods of the early Church is that effective evangelism is part of one’s lifestyle, one’s mindset, one’s personality. Effective evangelism is showing unbelievers what they are missing in their lives and what they could have by a lifestyle that is “Christian” in the truest possible sense.

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ⁱ William C. Weinrich, "Evangelism in the Early Church," in *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. XLV, (January-April 1981), pp. 61-74.

ⁱⁱ Weinrich, p. 64.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 48.

^v Milton L. Rudnick *Speaking the Gospel through the Ages: A History of Evangelism*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), p. 29.

^{vi} Rudnick, p. 28.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Rudnick, p. 30.

^{ix} Rudnick, p. 31.

^x Weinrich, p. 65.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} I. Apol. 39. quoted in Green, p. 167.

^{xiii} Weinrich, p. 65.

^{xiv} Eusebius, H. E. 3. 37.2 quoted in Green, p. 169.

^{xv} Green, p. 170.

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- ^{xvi} Ignatius, Polycarp I. Quoted in Green, p. 170.
- ^{xvii} Weinrich, p. 66.
- ^{xviii} Green, p. 172.
- ^{xix} Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, vol. II, Translated and edited by James Moffatt, (New York: William and Norgate, 1908), pp. 366-367.
- ^{xx} Walter Oetting, *The Church of the Catacombs*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964, second printing, 1970), p. 24.
- ^{xxi} Green, p. 175.
- ^{xxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} Green, p. 178.
- ^{xxiv} Hans Lietzmann, *A History of Early Christianity*, vol. II., Translated by Bertram Lee Woolf. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), pp. 151-152.
- ^{xxv} Weinrich, p. 68.
- ^{xxvi} J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), p. 67.
- ^{xxvii} Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Ante-Nicene Christianity, A.D. 100-325, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), p. 14.
- ^{xxviii} Schaff, p. 27.
- ^{xxix} Weinrich, p. 69.
- ^{xxx} Apol. 37. quoted by Weinrich, p. 69.
- ^{xxxi} Rudnick, p. 30.
- ^{xxxii} Rudnick, p. 36.
- ^{xxxiii} E. Glenn Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Church*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1981), p. 41.
- ^{xxxiv} Hinson, pp. 41-43.
- ^{xxxv} Hinson, p. 43.
- ^{xxxvi} Hinson, p. 44.
- ^{xxxvii} Hinson, pp. 44-45.
- ^{xxxviii} Weinrich, p. 70.
- ^{xxxix} Ibid.
- ^{xl} Green, pp. 178-193.
- ^{xli} Weinrich, p. 73.
- ^{xlii} Weinrich, p. 72.
- ^{xliii} Ibid.
- ^{xliv} Apol. 39., quoted by Weinrich, p. 73.