

EVANGELISM IN THE FIRST AND TWENTY FIRST CENTURIES

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A number of Christian writers have noted the similarities between the position of the Christian faith in the 1st and 21st centuries. Some have claimed that our situation now is the closest parallel to the position of the early church in 20 centuries. If this is so – and I believe they are right – there is much we can learn from the work and witness of those early believers as we seek to communicate our faith in what has become known as this postmodern era.

An historical overview

In the first century the Christian faith was a minority religion in a pagan world. When Jesus ascended to heaven the number of believers was about 120 (Acts 1:15) That number increased rapidly with 3000 converted on the day of Pentecost and another 2000 added shortly after (Acts 2:41; 4:4) At first the believers remained in Jerusalem but an outbreak of persecution forced them out; “All except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went”. (Acts 8:1,4) In addition to this personal evangelism of ordinary believers there was the witness of deacons, such as Phillip, and the missionary work of the Apostles, such as Paul. The Lord blessed this evangelistic activity and Christianity spread rapidly through the Roman Empire. By the end of the third century the number of Christians had reached an estimated 10-12 million, about a tenth of the total population of the empire.

The religious world of the 1st century was *polytheistic*, meaning that there were many gods. This struck the apostle Paul when he visited Athens; while looking around that ancient city “he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” (Acts 17:16) The religious climate was also *pluralistic*, meaning that this diversity of gods was welcomed and promoted.

All of this changed dramatically in 313 AD when Constantine, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, gave formal recognition to the Christian faith, so ending this long period of persecution. After this it became popular to be a Christian and the number of “believers” increased dramatically. This, however, was a mixed blessing for the church as many of those who professed faith were merely nominal in their belief.¹

The period from the fourth century to the mid 20th century has been described as the era of Christendom – literally “the domain of Christ”. During these 1600 years the Christian world view was challenged by movements such as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and there were many who did not believe in Christ and opposed Christianity. Yet throughout these 16 centuries most people accepted the Christian view of the world and accepted the influential role of the church.

However, the chickens of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment came home to roost in the 1960’s. The Christian world view was quickly discarded and was replaced with ideas and philosophies that had been building in strength for the past 300 years.

Today, in the 21st century, the Christians in the Western world are facing a similar situation to the one that faced believers in the first century. Again we are a minority religion in a pagan world. The dominant world view is *humanistic* – believing that man is the center of all things; *relativistic* – believing that there are no

absolute God-given standards; *polytheistic* – believing that there are many gods; and *pluralistic* – believing that religious diversity is to be accepted and even welcomed.

One significant difference between the situation then and now is that in the 1st century Christianity was new – the good news about Jesus was heard for the first time. By contrast, people in the 21st century western world think they have heard the gospel, and have rejected it. Leslie Newbiggin points out that the paganism of our western culture, “having been born out of the rejection of Christianity, is far more resistant to the gospel than the pre-Christian paganism with which cross-cultural missions have been familiar. Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time.”² Peter Jones, a Christian analyst of neo-paganism, maintains that our present world is in a worse state than even the 1st century; “the ongoing sexual revolution represent the deconstruction of Western civilization on a radically different basis... what we have seen in the last generation is unprecedented.”³

In this situation how should we witness about the Lord Jesus and what can we learn from how the early Christians shared the gospel?

Present the gospel in words

Believers in the early church spoke about Jesus to others and preached about him. The good news was not communicated in drama, mime, puppets, dance or music but *in words!* These other means were available to them but they chose not to use them. For example, elaborate dramatic festivals were very popular in the Roman and Greek culture. They were well known to the apostle Paul but he did not make use of them nor did he advocate this method to others. On the contrary, to the believers in the Greek city of Corinth he wrote that Christ had sent him “to preach the gospel” and that God had chosen “through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.” (1 Cor 1:17,21) Let’s follow the evangelistic method of the early church by presenting the written and spoken Word of God.

Practice a word and deed ministry

The early Christians were known for their acts of kindness to other believers and to those outside the church and these made a deep impression on pagan unbelievers. A combined word and deed ministry is a well-known and effective practice of Christians on the mission field. All over the world missionaries have reinforced the message about Christ by building hospitals, schools, training centers and rehabilitation units. The love of Christ taught in the Scriptures has been demonstrated in caring for the sick, visiting prisoners, teaching children, helping the disabled and feeding the hungry. This is a biblical emphasis. “Faith without works is dead.” (James 2:26) “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:18) Let’s also practice a word and deed ministry.

Build personal relationships

Studies have shown that by far the majority of people who come to faith (85% to 95% depending on the survey) do so through a personal relationship with a family member or friend. This high percentage is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future because postmodern people place a high value on personal relationships. Your ‘typical’ postmodernist wants to experience the reality of faith in a personal relationship with a Christian and wants to see evidence of that faith worked out in the practical realities of life. This is our challenge in this postmodern era.

The nations are coming to us

The early church came to see that the good news about Jesus was for all the nations. It took the Jewish Christians a while to realize this; they were accustomed to thinking that God was only interested in the people of Israel. Through a vision of clean and unclean animals the Lord taught Peter that he was not to call any man unclean. (Acts 10) The Lord specifically commissioned Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. (Acts 9:15; 13:2,46f) As the Christian faith spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire it reached both Jews and Gentiles.

Today evangelism among New Zealanders is difficult and the 'average' Kiwi seems unresponsive to the gospel. In this field we need to be cultivating the ground and sowing the seed. Yet other peoples of the world are coming to us and are more responsive to the gospel. Some of our congregations have seen a number of conversions among Asian immigrants.⁴ We still need to send missionaries and workers out to the nations, as we are doing, but let's make good use of the opportunities presented by the people coming to us from other countries and cultures.

Give it time

Further studies in our current day and age reveal that on average conversions to the Christian faith take a number of years. Dramatic conversions like that of the apostle Paul are rare. Usually unbelievers come to faith slowly. A young man professed his faith in our congregation in January. He first met a Christian friend three years prior to this. During these years he kept coming to church fairly regularly, sat in on an "Introducing God" course, met up with members of the congregation and with me. Gradually his questions were answered and he came to a sound and saving faith in Christ. Let's not be in a hurry to 'gain a convert'; rather let's give a person time to ask his questions, listen to the Word, observe the lives of believers and experience the fellowship of the church. This is a work of the Holy Spirit and he will bring the elect to faith in his time.

Make disciples

Jesus commanded us to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matt 28:19-20) The work of evangelism does not consist of merely bringing someone to the point of conversion but also incorporating him into the worship and fellowship of the church and then discipling him to maturity in the faith. I have just come home after leading the morning studies at the Family Camp. At the camp I met two couples who had come to the Reformed Church of Hastings from outside of the church. They told me that for a year every Sunday evening Rev Bruce Hoyt had taken them through the Heidelberg Catechism to answer their questions and instruct them in the faith. That is a good example of the work of discipling. No doubt you can cite examples known to you of that same process. Let's be sure we look after new Christians and those new to our churches and take the time to teach them everything Jesus has commanded us.

Conclusion

There is much we can learn from the evangelistic witness of the early church. They proclaimed the good news about Christ in an environment that was remarkably similar to our own. As we proclaim the same message and imitate their methods let's pray the Lord will bless what we do for the conversion of all those he has chosen to salvation.

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¹ For more on this period of history and the relationship between church and state see the article by Dr Sally Davey in the November 2009 issue of *Faith in Focus*.

² L Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986, p. 20.

³ *Australian Presbyterian*, October 2009; quoted in *Trowel and Sword*, December 2009, p. 35. For more by Peter Jones see www.truthXchange.com

⁴ See the article by Rev Dirk van Garderen about LABS in the ? 2008 issue of *Faith in Focus*.