

What the Early Church Fathers Can Teach Us About Evangelism Today

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Anyone would be hard-pressed to find a gospel minister who would not readily affirm that every Christian should be engaged in evangelism and that there is a great want of believer-priests who take that identity seriously. We can look directly at the Bible to show our disciples that the apostles were not the only ones preaching the good news,¹ but we ought not to stop there. Many will readily adhere to contemporary statements of faith² or popular books³ advocating for the right and duty of every Christian to share their faith. But can we go even deeper into our Christian tradition for help in understanding the biblical practice of evangelism? We can, and the Early Church Fathers, as windows into the Early Church's practice of evangelism, are among the best source material to help us do this.

These ancient Christian texts can enhance our understanding of evangelism and better instruct our contemporary practice in three particular ways.

¹ Consider for example Luke's claim that everyone in Asia heard the Gospel in the two years that Paul resided there (Acts 19:10). If Paul and his companions were the only ones regularly preaching the Gospel, this would simply be a mathematical impossibility.

² See *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article XI

³ Consider Robert Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993).

First, early Christians were convinced of the gospel and convicted to constantly speak about it. If we are likewise convinced, these writings challenge us to be about constant gospel proclamation in everyday life. Second, early Christians did not only preach a gospel of words but one of deeds as well. Thus, the transforming work of the gospel was demonstrated by changed individuals gathering into a robust community of faith. These early Christians beckon us to refuse to accept any bifurcation dividing the dramatic effects of the good news on the lives (and communal *life*) of those preaching from the proclamation of the message. Third, early Christians expected persecution and hardship on account of their faith and, on the whole, did not shy away because of fear. The blood of the martyrs calls out to us to take heart and not to flee every threat of persecution as that which is to be feared above all, but to see persecution as a blessed indicator that we are doing God's work in a broken world (1 Pet 3:13-16).

Convinced of and Constantly Sharing the Gospel

One of the earliest defenders of the faith, Justin Martyr, described to Trypho, a fictitious Jew, that the Christians in the 2nd Century viewed evangelism as a responsibility given to God's people in the Hebrew Bible. He said, "For even until the present time gifts of prophecy exist among us, from which fact you yourselves ought to understand that what was of old in your nation has been transferred to us."⁴ Here, Justin was establishing the Christian claim to the Old Testament prophets while arguing that the Spirit which formerly empowered the Jewish nation now inspires Christians. He went on, "[E]veryone who can say what is true and saith it not shall be judged by God, as God solemnly testified by Ezekiel... So it is that out of fear we endeavour for our part to discourse in accordance with the Scriptures."⁵

⁴ Justin, *Justin Martyr: the Dialogue with Trypho*, trans. A. Lukyn Williams (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930).

⁵ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*. We should note here that the "Scriptures" which the Early Church were devoted to were contained in the Jewish Old Testament. For a fuller example

On this, McKinion notes, “This community was responsible for presenting salvation to those outside of the church, or faced chastisement from God for not doing so. Therefore, it sought diligently to convince others of the validity of its message.”⁶ In describing the ubiquity and common nature of every-believer evangelism, Michael Green says, “They went everywhere gossiping the gospel; they did it naturally, enthusiastically, and with the conviction of those who are not paid to say that sort of thing.”⁷ The early Church made its mark on the ancient world through multitudes of ordinary believers preaching the gospel of their Lord to everyone, everywhere, all the time. They evangelized with such vigor because, as Justin noted, they saw it as their God-given responsibility to the world.

Preaching the Gospel with Good Works

The early Christians knew that they could not merely speak the gospel, but if their message was to be winsome, they also had to live out the message that the world was dying to see. The 3rd Century Christian scholar, Origen, said of the power of the gospel to change lives, “What absurdity, therefore, is there, if Jesus, desiring to manifest to the human race the power which he possesses to heal souls, should have selected notorious and wicked men, and should have raised them to such a degree of moral excellence, that they, became a pattern of the purest virtue to all who were converted by their instrumentality to the Gospel of Christ?”⁸ Or we may consider an excerpt

from the Early Church on preaching the gospel from the Old Testament, see Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching*.

⁶ Steven A. McKinion, ed., *Life and Practice in the Early Church: A Documentary Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2001). McKinion’s edited volume is a helpful introduction to writings of the Church Fathers on the life of the Early Church. For more on the content of the Early Church’s gospel message, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*.

⁷ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 243.

⁸ Origen, “Book 1, Chapter 63,” in *Against Celsus = Contra Celsum: The Complete English Translation from the Fourth Volume of the Ante-Nicene Fathers*, A. Cleveland Coxe, ed., Frederick Crombie, trans, (Jackson, MI: Ex Fontibus Co, 2013).

from the *Epistle to Diognetus*, “They live in countries of their own, but simply as sojourners. . . They marry like the rest of the world, they beget children, but they do not cast their offspring adrift. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They exist in the flesh, but they live not after the flesh. They spend their existence upon earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they surpass the laws. They love all men, and are persecuted by all.”⁹ Notice that in both of these Early Church accounts, the truthfulness of the message is validated by the power that the message has to change individual lives and reform communities of people into what may rightly be described as the “Kingdom of God.”

Contemporary sociologist Rodney Stark described the effect of Christianity in the ancient Greco-Roman world saying, “Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.”¹⁰

Expecting and Enduring Through Persecution

Jesus promised his disciples that hardship would come to them (Jn 16:33), and the writings of the Church Fathers document how many early Christians responded to persecution. In the 3rd Century, Tertullian provocatively stated

⁹ L.B. Radford, ed. and trans., *The Epistle to Diognetus* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1908), 63-64.

¹⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 161.

to Scapula, the Roman official overseeing the persecution of Christians in Carthage, “Your cruelty is our glory.”¹¹ In light of the upside-down structure of power and blessing preached in the gospel of Jesus (cf. Matt 5:3-12), whenever Rome persecuted Christians, it actually pushed the community to greater degrees of oneness with the glorified Christ. Tertullian went on to say, “[In spite of persecution] this community will be undying, for be assured that just in the time of its seeming overthrow it is built up into greater power.”¹² Rather than shrinking, many Christians bravely met persecution on account of their witness. The early Christians were strengthened in faith, seeing it as a means of growing closer to their Lord and of strengthening the witness of the whole Church.

Application to Contemporary Evangelism

In a brief survey of just a few Early Church Fathers, we see that the Early Church boldly proclaimed the message of salvation. Their transformed communal life was instrumental in validating the power of that message. Though persecution came, the Church weathered the various storms and were preserved as Christ’s Church. How, then, may the life and faith of these early Christians influence our practice of evangelism today?

First, like early Christians, we should pray for an all-consuming desire to see everyone around us come to a saving, loving relationship with the Lord Jesus. Such a disposition is thoroughly evangelical—our lives should primarily be about communicating the saving message of Christ. We will be standing in good company when we insist that all Christians should live each day asking, “With whom can I share the gospel today?” or “How can I ‘gossip the gospel’ at work, in the market, at the hospital, or in the village today?” This is not a fanatical response to the faith of the Bible or a modern, revivalistic practice that should be viewed with suspicion. Regular, broad

¹¹ McKinion, *Life and Practice in the Early Church*, 122.

¹² McKinion, *Life and Practice in the Early Church*, 123.

gospel sharing is a biblical *and* historical Christian practice. The Church Fathers help us confidently make that claim.

Second, we must proclaim as winsomely with our lives as we do with our voices. Yes, this means that each person should live a life of excellent character, but we should notice the force of the argument from the Church Fathers; it is on the virtue of the community of Christ, not merely individuals. Whether we are in South Asia engaging Brahmin Hindus, in the Middle East engaging Muslims, or in the U.S. engaging “Nones¹³,” we need to show outsiders that our message will change their lives in two ways: the power of the Holy Spirit will enable them to live lives of obedience to the Law of God, and the community of like-minded Christians will welcome them into a family based on love, grace, and the godly order given in the Bible. We must call people out of wickedness into holiness and as we do this, we must show them that in leaving the communion of the wicked, they are entering the fellowship of the righteous, however imperfectly realized.

Third, Christians should expect, and not shy away from, persecution in diverse forms. We have ample promises from Scripture and examples from Church history that those “who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12). While persecution in any form is a symptom of the Fall and something that should not be desired in and of itself, it may be a healing balm for churches’ health. We see this in the early church writings. Persecution caused Christians to reevaluate what they believed and practiced in light of antagonism,¹⁴ thus clarifying the message to both the faithful and outsiders. Suffering often cleansed the Church of those who

¹³ What some sociologists call those who indicate that they have no particular religious beliefs; see Gregory A. Smith, “Religious ‘nones’ in America: Who They Are and What They Believe,” *Pew Research Center*, January 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

¹⁴ Many early Church writings are defenses of the faith addressed to hostile actors in the ancient world. As one example among many, see Justin’s *First Apology*.

are following Christ under various pretenses,¹⁵ thus driving her closer to the heavenly ideal of a truly regenerate Church. Additionally, when Christians suffered well, they testified to the utter transcendence of the reign of King Jesus. Because we hope in a King whose kingdom is not of this world but is imminently coming, we do not fear what man can do to us or say about us. Such courage was an effective witness in the ancient world and is today as well.

Lastly, this brief survey should encourage contemporary Christians to consider the testimonies of the Early Church Fathers as hermeneutical tools for deriving our practice of obedience to the Great Commission. Nothing compares to the Bible in directing faith and practice—it is sufficient. This, however, does not mean that anyone can derive his biblical faith and practice simply by reading the Scriptures void of external influences. The Bible is a divinely inspired, human text. It must be read through various lenses because it is about God creating, entering, and redeeming our cultured world. Because its intended audience—mankind—is bound by time, space, and ability, we, therefore, always read the Bible through our own lenses. If we accept this reality, we may gladly take on the lens (or lenses) of the Early Church Fathers to help us understand our faith and our practice of seeing God’s kingdom come “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10).

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¹⁵ Many Christians left the Church during various persecutions, thus revealing who among those that professed Christ actually “loved not their lives even unto death” (Rev. 12:11 ESV).