

Forward in Christ at the Dawn of the First Millennium

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The story of the early centuries of the Christian church is a remarkable story. It is the story of growth and expansion. It is the story of faithful leaders and committed followers. It is the story of courageous witnesses and extraordinary sacrifices. But most of all it is the story of God's grace and the power of the Gospel to overcome a world of darkness.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Because of this demonic opposition, the church's struggle was not and is not an easy one. But Jesus promised that the gates of Hades would not prevail against his church. Clearly, that has not kept the old evil foe from doing his best and having his share of success in every age. But God's church has survived and grown, and in many ways it is stronger today than it was in its earliest days. It has been built on the backs and lives and sacrifices of countless saints and martyrs.

How did that happen? Did it just happen? Where can we see the hand of God in all this? What conditions favored the remarkable spread of Christianity? Historian Kenneth Scott Latourette exclaims: "One of the most amazing and significant facts of history is that within five centuries of its birth Christianity won the professed allegiance of the overwhelming majority of the population of the Roman Empire and even the support of the Roman state."¹ In another place he refers to the growth of the church as "astounding."

There is a multitude of studies on the growth and spread of the church as historians and social scientists have tried to explain this phenomenon. Some try to attribute the rise of Christianity to social, political, and cultural factors alone, assuming that one religion is no better than another, and that the same god is the god of all religions. They contend that Christianity caught a lucky break because it arose at a fortuitous time in world history. The times certainly were right, and we will take a look at those times.

On the other hand, sociologist Rodney Stark of the University of Washington goes to great lengths to contend that "it was (its) particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most sweeping and successful revitalization movements in history. And it was the way these doctrines took on flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity."² And so we will also look at some of those doctrines and the way they were put into practice in the lives of the early Christians.

GROWTH

The Christian church certainly grew! "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). "The number of men grew to about five thousand" (Acts 4:4). "More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (Acts 5:14). "The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

How fast did it grow? Stark uses historical data, the estimates of historians, and sociological assumptions to make the following growth projections, based on an estimated population of 60 million in the Roman Empire and a growth rate of 40% per decade:³

¹ Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), p. 65.

² Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 211.

³ Stark, p. 7.

Year	Number of Christians	Percent of Population
40 AD	1,000	0.0017
50 AD	1,400	0.0023
100 AD	7,530	0.0126
150 AD	40,496	0.07
200 AD	217,795	0.36
250 AD	1,171,356	1.9
300 AD	6,299,832	10.5
350 AD	33,882,008	56.5

How accurate are these figures? Based on what we read in the Book of Acts, we would disagree with the starting point of only 1,000 Christians in the year 40. Stark thinks Luke exaggerates. But his estimate of a 40% growth rate per decade is made believable when that rate produces a consensus figure of 6 million Christians by the year 300, and when he shows that the growth of the Mormon church has been 43% per decade in the past century. This rate of growth would help explain why Constantine, at the beginning of the fourth century, found it expedient to embrace the church. Soon half the empire would have some connection with Christianity!

We know from Jesus' missionary command that the apostles were to be witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We know how the church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas on missionary journeys throughout Asia Minor, and how Paul eventually reached Rome and perhaps even Spain, if the wish he expressed in Romans 15 came to fruition. But we don't know who founded the church at Rome. We don't know how the churches in Egypt, Carthage, or Lyons got started. We have to assume that ordinary Christians carried the faith to these places. There are indications that Christians were located as far west as England and as far east as India and even China by the year 250, but specific evidence and details of the latter are lacking. But it is certain that by the year 250 Christianity had spread to the ends of the then known world, and that much of this missionary work was done by rank and file believers.

OBSTACLES TO THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL

But it was hardly easy. The numbers initially were terrifyingly small. And there were enormous obstacles. In the beginning, wherever they went, Christians were opposed as an anti-social, atheistic, and depraved people. Making things worse, their "god" was a crucified criminal. An indication of how the pagan world viewed the story of Jesus was scratched on the graffiti covered walls of Rome (ca. 200 AD). A drawing was found of someone standing in front of a man hanging on a cross. The man has the head of an ass, and the inscription says, "Alexamenos worships his god." To Greek wisdom, such an idea was ridiculous. To Roman power, it was weak. And to Jewish monotheism, what was said about Jesus was nothing less than blasphemy.

Consider the Jews first. To the Jews in Jerusalem, the followers of Jesus were "unschooled, ordinary men" (Acts 4:13). Their claim that an itinerant carpenter from backwater Nazareth was the fulfillment of Israel's hopes and dreams, that he had a wisdom greater than that of Moses, and that he was God's great Messiah—those were claims the Jewish leaders detested. When they heard them, they became "furious and gnashed their teeth" (Acts 7:54). After all, didn't the scriptures say, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse"? (Deuteronomy 21:23). How could God's Messiah be under God's curse?

Added to this were the Christian claims that Jesus was "LORD" (Jahweh), that the Temple was unnecessary (Stephen)⁴, that no food was unclean (Peter and Paul)⁵, that circumcision was not required (the Jerusalem Council)⁶, and that the Sabbath law was not binding (Paul)⁷. How could the Gospel hope to go forward among the Jews when it overthrew so many of their laws and traditions?

⁴ Acts 7:48ff.

⁵ Acts 10:15; Romans 14:3, Acts 15:19.

⁶ Acts 15:19.

⁷ Colossians 2:16-17.

There were also obstacles to the Gospel in the Greco-Roman world. Rumors about Christians abounded. They were said to be atheists because they denied the existence of the gods and had no image of their own so-called god. They were said to be guilty of incest because they “loved their brothers and sisters.” And they were accused of butchering babies and eating their flesh and blood, a distorted reference to the Eucharist. Marcus Cornelius Fronto (c.100-c.166 AD), tutor of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, wrote:

Now the story of their initiating novices is as detestable as it is notorious. An infant, concealed in meal so as to deceive the unwary, is placed before the one who is in charge of the, rites. This infant, hidden under the meal, is struck by the novice, who thinks he is striking harmless blows but kills him with blind and hidden wounds. Horrible to relate, they drink his blood, eagerly distributing the members of his body, and are united by this sacrifice and pledged to common silence by their awareness of guilt... Everyone knows about their banquet, and everyone speaks of it. People of both sexes and every age come to the banquet on the accustomed day with the children, sisters, mothers. There, after much feasting when the banquet has grown warm and the heat of drunkenness burns into incestuous desire, a dog tied to the lampstand is aroused to run and jump by throwing a bit of food beyond the length of the rope by which he is tied. Thus with the light... overturned and put out, the haphazard embraces of shameful desire take place in the shameless darkness.⁸

Such were the rumors about these despicable people. They were misfits in society because they did not attend the shows or games or plays that glorified bloodshed and idolatry. They would not read pagan literature or serve in the army. They refused to be painters or sculptors because artists created images. They would not sign business contracts that required the taking of an oath. And, of course, they refused to burn incense to the emperor.

At whatever level in society it was attempted, evangelism in the early church was a very daunting undertaking. It was a task involving social odium, political danger, the charge of treachery to the gods and the state, the insinuation of horrible crimes, and calculated opposition from a combination of sources more powerful, perhaps, than at any time since.⁹

PATHWAYS FOR THE GOSPEL

And yet, the first centuries were an ideal time, under God’s direction, for the Gospel to go forward. Most of us are familiar with some of the main reasons, but they deserve to be reviewed in order to appreciate God’s timing.

First of all, the political situation in the Roman Empire was just right when Jesus was born. Fifty years earlier, the empire had been embroiled in a civil war as Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Anthony, and Octavius vied for power. Octavius, later known as Augustus, won out at the battle of Actium in 31 BC. His reign brought tremendous advantages for the spread of the Gospel. The whole Mediterranean world was now under one government, and travel was possible without the need for a passport. Roman citizens especially could move about in reasonable safety. We think of the Roman roads that made travel easier, but equally important were the navigational routes. The Apostle Paul used both. The Gospel moved along these conduits just as new technologies today are serving the Gospel in ways that were impossible fifty years ago. Is God giving us an opportunity similar to these conditions at the dawn of the first millennium? Imaginative minds are stirred when there are new possibilities, and there were new possibilities just at that time. The world was growing smaller, and the Gospel was moving in ways that it could not have moved at an earlier time. God’s timing was right.

⁸ Quoted from Walter Oetting, *The Church of the Catacombs* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), p. 89.

⁹ Green, Michael. *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 47.

Another advantage at this “fullness of time” was Greek language and culture. Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) unwittingly served the Gospel by bringing the benefits of Greek culture to the lands he conquered.

- After Rome occupied Greece in the second century BC, the Greek language turned the tables and began to conquer Latin throughout the empire, even in Italy. This was of enormous benefit to Christian missionaries. Not only did they not have to learn the languages and dialects of the various parts of the empire, they also did not have to speak the language of the Roman conquerors, reducing potentially negative reactions to the Gospel for nationalistic reasons.
- In addition, the Greek language had an extensive vocabulary that could accurately communicate the theological concepts of the Christian faith.
- Furthermore, the Greek version of the Bible was in use in synagogues outside of Palestine, making the synagogue service accessible to Gentiles. It’s hard to imagine Gentiles attending “church” if they couldn’t understand what was being said.
- Finally, the universality of the Greek language meant that the writings of Christians could easily be read in all the cities and provinces of Rome without having to be translated.

God also used the religion of Judaism, despite its antipathy toward Christianity (especially in Palestine) to open doors to the Gospel. Acts 2 indicates that Jews were living in every part of the empire, and they took their synagogues and Messianic hopes with them. When Christian missionaries traveled from city to city, they always headed straight for the synagogue. There they testified that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah that these hearers were expecting. They followed the pattern that Jesus had set in Luke 24 where “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (v. 27). That pattern of beginning in the Old Testament was followed by Peter and Stephen when they preached in Jerusalem (Acts chapters 2, 3, and 7) and by the Apostle Paul in the synagogues at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13) and Thessalonica (Acts 17).

And yet, not all those Jews who heard the Gospel believed the Gospel, much to Paul’s disappointment and even bewilderment (Romans 9-11). There was Jewish opposition in many of the cities where he preached. But Stark argues against the commonly accepted belief that there was an early separation between the synagogue and the church.¹⁰ He points out that many of the Diaspora Jews had been “Hellenized” by this time, meaning that they had become relatively secular and worldly. Living where they did, it was increasingly difficult for them to keep the suffocating laws and traditions of Judaism. And so, in spite of examples in the book of Acts of Jewish opposition to the Gospel, many rank-and-file Jews outside Palestine would have found Christianity quite appealing because of its relaxed approach to Old Testament laws. The decision of the Apostolic Council in Acts 15 opened the door of the church to the Gentiles, to be sure. But many of the Hellenized Jews would have been happy about it as well. The Christian Gospel was an alternative they could slip into quite easily while still retaining their Old Testament heritage, allowing them to live more conveniently in a Gentile world. Stark is of the opinion that “in the middle of the second century the church still was dominated by people with Jewish roots and strong current ties to the Jewish world,” and that this continued even into the third century. He advances a number of reasons for this claim, including that it explains why John Chrysostom and others, as late as the fourth century, engaged in unexpectedly strong anti-Jewish polemics in their sermons and writings. He suggests that these polemics were inspired by fellowship activities that were continuing between the synagogue and the church, and that a great many Jewish Christians still had not cut their

¹⁰ Stark, p. 49ff.

ties with the religious festivals, practices, and legalistic direction of Judaism. At this late date they were still being challenged to decide whether they were going to be Christians or remain in Judaism.¹¹

But Jewish acceptance or rejection aside, it is clear that the synagogue served as a pathway to the Gospel for the Gentiles. When Paul entered a new city and went to a synagogue, he not only had an audience consisting of his fellow countrymen, but he was also able to make a connection with Gentiles. The teachings of Judaism were widely known and respected among educated people who were fed up with the immorality and foolishness of paganism. Jewish standards of morality were far superior to what went on even among the gods of paganism, not to speak of what went on among those who followed and revered those gods. Those who went to the synagogues heard that there is only one God, that he is the Maker of heaven and earth, and that the gods of the Greeks and Romans were empty idols. At least it was a start. And the worship of the synagogue, with its prayers, Psalm singing, Scripture readings, and exhortations to godly living was certainly more interesting and dignified than watching a pagan priest examine the entrails of an animal.

And yet, even though Judaism had some attraction for the Gentiles, it was too focused on obedience to the Law to gain any great following in the empire. Few Gentiles were willing to take the final step of actually converting. This was not God's tool to bring salvation to the nations. But it did open doors at the dawn of the first millennium to allow the Gospel to go forward.

Another circumstance that favored the success of the Gospel was the moribund state of competing religions. The old state religion was all but dead, especially in the cities, in spite of efforts by several later emperors to revive it. The philosophies of Stoicism and of the Epicureans had some influence on the upper classes, but they failed to attract and hold the masses. Rome, for its part, mostly didn't care how many deities were worshiped and by whom, just as long as the emperor was given his due. It was a time of pluralism plus. One writer speaks of "a bewildering mass of alternatives. There were too many cults, too many mysteries, too many philosophies of life to choose from."¹² Pontius Pilate well expressed the frustration of his age when he asked, "What is truth?" Similar to the situation in our own day, people were reluctant to insist that they and they alone had the truth. If there had been a religious monopoly, with governmental insistence on that religion, it would have been harder for Christianity to gain a foothold in the Roman world. But in an environment of little conviction and much confusion, Christianity stood apart. This created opposition, but it also challenged people with its exclusive but persuasive claims.

The cults and mystery religions also helped prepare the way for the Gospel. These religions have even been called a "bridge" between paganism and Christianity because provided people with a sense of belonging and fellowship that was largely lacking elsewhere, and with the promise of a happy life after death. The spread of the cults was an indication that religious needs were generally not being met. They addressed deep-seated fears about life and death that the traditional religions could not satisfy. They also took sin seriously and provided rituals that were designed to bring cleansing. Where the cults went because of spiritual hunger, Christianity followed and provided better answers.

PERSUASIVE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

And, of course, Christianity did have better answers. It was especially the doctrines of Christianity and how these doctrines changed the way people thought and acted that led to its success. At the core of Christian preaching, as the book of Acts makes clear, was the doctrine of the Resurrection. Death was the great specter that haunted the ancient world, "the shroud that enfolds all people, the sheet that covers all nations" (Isaiah 25:7). For Greeks and Romans, only the gods were immortal -- that's what made them gods. Whereas the fate of

¹¹ Stark, p. 65-66. Other reasons were Marcion's failed attempt to remove the Old Testament from the canon, an idea that might have appealed to a predominately Gentile church with no strong ties to the Old Testament but would have been repulsive to Jewish Christians; also, archeological findings indicate that most Christian churches during this early period were located in the Jewish sections of cities.

¹² Dodds, E.R. *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Quoted in Stark, p. 197.

the man on the street was to live on as a disembodied spirit in a shadowy netherworld called Hades. Death was something to be feared or approached with resignation and gloom.

But when it was preached that Jesus had defeated death through his Resurrection, the life of believers took on new meaning. Peter sang, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!" (1 Peter 1:3). Because of Jesus' victory, death became the entrance to a life that was far better than this one and far better than what traditional religion offered. The Resurrection was the key message. Even a secular magazine like *Newsweek*, in an article entitled "2000 Years of Jesus," recognized that "at the core of the Christian faith was the assertion that the crucified Jesus was resurrected by God ...The message was clear: by submitting to death, Jesus had destroyed its power, thereby making eternal life available to everyone. This Christian affirmation radically changed the relationship between the living and the dead."¹³ Prof. Theodore Hartwig commented in a recent *Northwestern Lutheran* article: "Few hymns survive from the first 200 years of the Christian church. Those that do, concentrate on the Lord's Resurrection."¹⁴ Christians had a Savior who was alive and who promised to give them life again.

But the doctrine of the Resurrection was attractive not only because of what it offered for the future. It also had an immediate impact. It can even be said that because Christians had the promise of the Resurrection, they survived illness at a higher rate than non-Christians. Why? Because they were willing to stay and care for their sick instead of abandoning them. They could do that because they did not fear death, as did their pagan neighbors. Their attitude could be, "If I die, I die; but then I have eternal life." By contrast, the Romans threw their sick into the streets and abandoned them during the plagues. Dionysius of Alexandria (c.200-c.265 AD), after explaining how the Christian community stayed and nursed the sick and dying, wrote:

The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease.¹⁵

This willingness to care for the sick and dying benefited the church in two ways. First, non-believers would have noticed that more Christian than non-Christians were surviving, and this would have been an influence toward future conversions, even superstitious ones. And secondly, since more Christians survived, after each plague their percentage of the population increased. L. Michael White comments,

It's been suggested by demographers that if you've got a survival rate of only one tenth more among one part of the population than another segment of population when you have a massive die off ...the result will be that at the end of the process [there will be] far more members of that one group relative to the total population. In other words, in a very short period of time you can have a group that was at one point a very small minority seemingly become miraculously now the majority, and I think in part that's what happened to the Christians. That through this period of very turbulent times in the second and third century, the Christians now become a significant proportion of the leading citizens of some of the major cities of the Roman world.¹⁶

Another doctrine that favored the growth of Christianity was the teaching that God actually loved the world, along with its corollary that people should love one another. The idea that God loved us while we were still sinners was an entirely new idea. "The simple phrase 'For God so loved the world...' would have puzzled

¹³ *Newsweek*, March 29, 1999.

¹⁴ Hartwig, Theodore. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, July, 2000, p. 20.

¹⁵ Quoted in Stark, p. 83.

¹⁶ White, L. Michael, Professor of Classics and Director of the Religious Studies Program, University of Texas at Austin. Interview on the PBS program *Frontline* From Jesus to Christ, 1998.

an educated pagan. And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd.”¹⁷ Aristotle taught that gods could feel no love for mere humans. Indeed, ancient mythology was full of stories in which the gods did wicked things to people, often just for the fun of it.

Going further, classical philosophers regarded mercy and pity as defects of character that reasonable people should avoid. It went against justice to give aid and assistance to a person who didn’t deserve it.

How appealing it must have been, then, to hear the Good News that God loves the world and sent his Son to give his life in payment for human sin! And how encouraging it must have been to be part of a community where people actually practiced this love and cared for each other. Everyone was accepted on equal terms: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3:28). Christians even extended their benevolence to those who were not part of the household of faith. Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363 AD) complained that pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians because Christian growth was being caused by their “moral character, even if pretended... The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well; everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”¹⁸ The kind of help that Christians provided for widows, orphans and the poor was generally not available elsewhere in the Roman world.

“So the word of God spread” (Acts 6:7). “The word of God continued to increase and spread” (Acts 12:24). “The word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:20). It was the power of the Gospel, the tool of the Holy Spirit for conversion, and the related teachings of the Christian faith, that ultimately caused the remarkable growth of the church. God sent His Son when political, social, and cultural conditions in the world were just right for the Gospel. But it was the Gospel that changed those who believed it so radically that their lives became a magnet to draw others as well. With the Gospel powerfully revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God’s church was equipped to go Forward in Christ.

One of the favorite games we seem to like to play in the WELS is the SWOT game. So let’s do a “SWOT analysis” of the church in those early years.

S =STRENGTHS

Certainly the greatest strength that shaped the church in the first centuries was the Gospel itself. The Gospel, of course, was not new. God’s people had known his promise to provide a Savior for thousands of years. But they had been living under the old covenant, and Judaism had turned this covenant, which was a one-sided display of God’s grace, into a two-sided covenant of works.¹⁹ As the Apostle Paul pointed out, in the hands of Judaism the old covenant became a “ministry of death and condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:7,9). The opportunity to respond to God’s goodness with lives of sanctification was turned by many into an effort to earn his favor by means of fastidious obedience. The Gospel was being obscured.

Michael Green observes: “Any religion dominated by the concept of law and moral responsibility before God must lead either to nomism or despair. How can a man be just before his Maker? Judaism had no answer.”²⁰

But then came Jesus! Even before he arrived Jeremiah wrote that God’s “new covenant” would have no prescribed outward rules by which people could qualify themselves with God. For God said, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts ...I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 23:33-34). The “new wine” of God’s grace was so powerful that it broke the old wineskins of Judaism and flowed freely and abundantly on people of every tribe, nation, and language. The Gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed” (Romans 1:16-17). Where Judaism had no answer for how a sinner could be just before his Maker, the Gospel proclaimed forgiveness of sins through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, a new life now, and a happy eternal life in the future.

¹⁷ Stark, p. 211.

¹⁸ Quoted in Stark, p. 84.

¹⁹ Lawrenz, Dr. John C. *TORAH: What is it For us Today?* Conference essay, p. 9.

²⁰ Green, p. 110.

A second strength of the early church was the zeal with which so many Christians shared their faith. Green summarizes:

Communicating the faith was not regarded as the preserve of the very zealous or of the officially designated evangelist. Evangelism was the prerogative and the duty of every Church member. We have seen apostles and wandering prophets, nobles and paupers, intellectuals and fishermen all taking part enthusiastically in this the primary task committed by Christ to his Church. The ordinary people of the Church saw it as their job: Christianity was supremely a lay movement, spread by informal missionaries.²¹

And it wasn't just something they were "supposed" to do. "We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard," said Peter (Acts 4:20). This was true not only of Peter and John, but also of ordinary Christians everywhere. Those who understood the Gospel deeply believed that forgiveness and salvation came only through Jesus Christ, and that without Christ a person would be eternally lost. They believed what Peter believed, that "salvation is found in no one else" (Acts 4:12), and they were concerned to bring that salvation to others. "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (Acts 8:4).

Why do today's Christians not seem to have that same zeal? One reason may be that in the first three centuries most people came into the church as adults. These were people who knew what it was like to live in fear and darkness, "without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). But now that they had seen the light of forgiveness and received certainty of salvation in Christ, this had a dramatic effect on them. Many of them came dynamic witnesses, speaking from experience and not from a memorized script. The best evangelists are those who were lost and now are found, something that most Christians today know about only in theory and as a learned doctrine.

Another strength of the early church was the quality of lives of the believers. Christians took the ethical injunctions contained in the Scriptures very seriously. One writer comments that the cults of paganism and mysticism were not able to get people to do much of anything.²² By contrast, Christians were changed people in what they did and what they did not do

We have already spoken about their care for the sick, their support for the needy, and the many ways they showed their love and concern for their "neighbor" in the widest sense. The way they lived lent credibility to the message they shared. Walter Oetting refers to their works of charity as "one of the greatest stars in the church's crown."²³ The second century Greek satirist Lucian exclaimed: "It is incredible to see the ardor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator (Jesus) has put into their heads that they are all brethren."²⁴

It would seem that today's church does a fairly good job of helping those who are our brothers and sisters in the faith, although I'm not so sure you could say that we "spare nothing" to do that. But are we just as good at "doing good to all people" (Galatians 6:10), and doing so in our personal lives, and not just impersonally through an agency? Is the world around us "amazed" at what they see us do for others? I think of that when strangers ask the church for gas money, a night's stay in a motel, and money for food and car repairs. What would those early Christians have done?

But it was not only what Christians did that showed the quality of their lives. It was also what they avoided doing. In the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr (c.100-c.165 AD), in explaining the changed lives of Christians, wrote:

Those who once rejoiced in fornication now delight in continence alone; those who made use of magic arts have dedicated themselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who once took most

²¹ Green, p. 274.

²² Stark, p. 206.

²³ Oetting, p. 80.

²⁴ Quoted in Oetting, p. 80.

pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of [their different] customs now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us, so that they, living according to the fair commands of Christ, may share with us the good hope of receiving the same things [that we will] from God, the Master of all.²⁵

There was a clear difference between the lives of the people of “the Way” and the lives of those outside the church. The second century Letter to Diognetus characterized Christians this way:

They marry and have children just like everyone else; but they do not kill unwanted babies. They offer a shared table, but not a shared bed. They are at present “in the flesh,” but they do not live “according to the flesh.” They are passing their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the appointed laws, and go beyond the laws in their own lives.²⁶

A fourth strength of the early church was the writings of the apostles and evangelists and of the Old Testament. Having a written Scripture that was authoritative and prescriptive gave Christians a firm footing when determining what to believe and how to live. With its connection to the Old Testament, Christianity had the “sanction of antiquity”²⁷ that many were looking for to escape the morass of conflicting philosophies, new cults, and the latest guru. From the very beginning Christians had revered the Jewish scriptures, showing from them how the work and life of Jesus were the fulfillment of these writings. The New Testament canon took a while to be universally accepted. Initially the eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry carried the story of his life, death, and resurrection from place to place by memory, under the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told them, “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). But as these eyewitnesses began to die, the record of his ministry had to be written. At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius spoke about four Gospels, insisting that there had to be just four, no more and no less. In the mid-second century the heretic Marcion developed his own list of books that were acceptable to him, rejecting the Old Testament, but including the letters of Paul (edited) and the Gospel of Luke (also edited). It seems likely that the work and teachings of Marcion hastened the formation of the canon as the church responded to his claims. By the end of the second century most of our present twenty-seven books were regarded as canonical, although the first actual listing of the complete canon as we have it today cannot be found until the year 367.²⁸

Briefly, another strength of the church would be the thorough catechetical instruction that new believers received in preparation for baptism. It was harder to get into the church then than it is today. In some places this instruction lasted as long as three years. Hippolytus reports that before a catechumen was baptized, he was examined whether he lived soberly, visited the sick, and otherwise showed a grasp of the Christian life.²⁹ And the baptism ceremony that followed had considerable ritual that made it clear that a definite break was being made from the old way of life, renouncing “the devil and all his works and all his ways.”

W = WEAKNESSES

But we should not imagine that all was perfect in the early church. If the Gospel was the chief strength of the church, the loss of the Gospel, or at least the obscuring of it, would also be its greatest weakness. Referring to the writings of the Apostolic Fathers in the early second century, J.P. Koehler is bold to say that “in

²⁵ Quoted in Oetting, p. 114.

²⁶ Quoted in *Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Berks, England: Lion Publishing, 1977), p. 71.

²⁷ Latourette, p. 84.

²⁸ Latourette, p. 134.

²⁹ Oetting, p. 29.

all of these writings there is a marked lack of understanding the Gospel... Christ became the conveyor of the true perception of God and of the right moral law. The gift of Christ was no longer the righteousness that counts with God, but the perception of the one God.”³⁰ In other words, who Jesus was (Lord and God) received more attention than what Jesus did (the Savior from sin). Walter Oetting comments:

As various controversies beset the church and as Christians attempted to communicate their faith to others, this message of salvation too often took a seemingly secondary position. The Gospel does not shine through with the same brilliance in Clement of Rome as it does in Paul even though they were writing to the same congregation with many of the same problems. The apologists in the second century were more concerned to defend the Christian belief in one God than they were to impress the message of salvation. In some of the Apologies the saving Word of Jesus Christ is hardly discussed.³¹

Especially in reaching out to the Gentiles, Jesus as Lord was emphasized more than Jesus as Savior from sin. To the heathen, Jesus was presented as the deliverer from hostile spiritual forces like the Furies, the Fates, and the powers of magic.³² Many people lived in fear of demons who were thought to be the source of illness and disaster. During his lifetime Jesus proved that he could defeat these demonic powers. Psalm 110:1 was a key passage: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” Jesus was the ultimate deliverer, but it was a deliverance from those outside forces that had previously filled them with fear. The Gospel also suffered at the hands of teachers who put altogether too much stress on the Christian life. As we have seen, the quality of Christians’ lives resulted in people being attracted to the faith. But that immediately put the focus on how Christians should live, and the impression was easily given that obedience to the ethical injunctions of the New Testament was the way to salvation. That tendency is found in many of the writings of the era immediately after the apostles. For example, we find these thoughts in the Second Letter of Clement (c.100 AD) (which is really a sermon, not a letter):

Our stay in this world of the flesh is slight and short, but Christ’s promise is great and wonderful, and means rest in the coming Kingdom and in eternal life. What, then, must we do to get these things, except to lead a holy and upright life and to regard these things of the world as alien to us and not to desire them?... If we do the will of Christ, we shall find rest, but if not, nothing will save us from eternal punishment if we fail to heed His commands.... What assurance have we that we shall enter God’s kingdom if we fail to keep our baptism pure and undefiled? Or who will plead for us if we are not found to have holy and upright deeds?... If we renounce these pleasures and master our souls by avoiding their evil lusts, we shall share in Jesus’ mercy... Let us, then, do what is right so that we may finally be saved.”³³

It is clear that “cheap grace” was not being dispensed! But I doubt that sentences like these would survive the seminary’s Homiletics department. Koehler is blunt: “Because a clear doctrine of Justification and Sanctification was missing,... one must take it as fact that the doctrinal views, precisely in this central point, were in a state of questionable confusion.”³⁴ The obscuring of the Gospel can also be seen in another aspect of the life of the church. In its earliest form, each Christian community was small and consisted of highly motivated and dedicated individuals. Church discipline was rigorous, and members were held to the highest moral standards. Once a person came into the church through baptism, he was expected to avoid all sin. If there

³⁰ Koehler, J. P. *Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, (Milwaukee, Wis.: Northwestern Publishing House, 1917) (translation as it appeared serially in *Faith-Life*, Jan/Feb, 1994, p. 19). “Faith-Life,” January/February, 1994, p. 19.

³¹ Oetting, p. 58.

³² Green, p. 123.

³³ Clement of Rome. *The Second Letter of Clement*, excerpts from chapters 5, 6, 16, 19. Quoted in Oetting, p. 107ff.

³⁴ Koehler, p. 18.

was sin, a public confession before the congregation was expected, and various acts of penitence were required. Tertullian (c.160-c.230 AD) was especially rigorous in describing what was expected of the penitent after baptism:

[The penitent] must lie in sackcloth and ashes, cover himself with rags and sorrow. This severe treatment is an exchange for the sins committed. He must take only the necessary food and drink... Praying, fasting, groaning, crying out to God, prostrating himself before the congregation, as he pleads with them to carry his name before God. True Confession does all this to make repentance acceptable and to honor God by showing fear. This serves as a substitute for God's wrath and, as it were, exchanges temporal mortification for eternal punishment.³⁵

Of course, none of these efforts to enforce sanctification did anything to deter the sinful nature. But the groundwork was being laid for all kinds of abuses, including purgatory, indulgences, and the whole penitential system of the Roman Catholic Church.

With the rapid growth of the church at the end of the second century onward the problem of worldliness among Christians increased, and the gap between "ordinary" believers and the religious "elite" began to widen. Soon a distinction was made between what all Christians were required to do and what one could do who desired a higher level of holiness. Voluntary poverty and voluntary celibacy were considered beyond the reach of ordinary Christians, but those who could attain to them deserved special merit. The Shepherd of Hermas, written perhaps as early as the end of the first century, declared that one could do more than God commanded and thus gain greater glory. These ideas led to the asceticism that began to be practiced at an early date and to the monasticism that arose at the end of the third century. Individuals moved away from society into the deserts of Syria and Egypt in order to become more pure and to achieve a closer communion with God. Simon Stylites spent the last 36 years of his life on a pillar and was so focused on being "spiritual" that he neglected his physical needs to the extent that he was said to "drip with vermin."³⁶ Others chose other forms of extreme austerity to demonstrate their total devotion to God, and these people were highly revered by ordinary Christians. It's hard to avoid the conclusion from these examples that a great deal of legalism and work righteousness had set in at an early date. On the other hand, it is also possible to find beautiful Gospel statements in the writings of early Christians. A fourth century monk by the name of Macarius said it like this:

If anyone takes his stand upon a righteousness and redemption of his own, not looking for the righteousness of God who is the Lord, as the apostle says, "who is made unto us righteousness and redemption," he labors in vain and to no purpose. For all the dreams of a righteousness of his own is at the last day manifested as nothing but filthy rags, as the prophet Isaiah says, "All our righteousness is as filthy rags." Let us then beg and implore God to "clothe us with the garment of salvation," Jesus Christ our Lord.³⁷

Obviously Martin Luther was not the first monk to get it right.

O = OPPORTUNITIES

If parish planners and strategists had existed in the first centuries, they would have been excited about all the opportunities that were available to the church. Jesus had promised his disciples that he would be with them and that he would give them the power of the Holy Spirit to enable them to witness to him to the ends of the earth. They had the most wonderful message to share, having been called by Jesus to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations. They took that message and went forward in Christ.

³⁵ Tertullian. *On Repentance*, 9. Quoted in Oetting, p. 73.

³⁶ Latourette, p. 228.

³⁷ Quoted in Green, p. 137.

As indicated earlier, access to “all nations” was available as never before. And historians agree that the nations were particularly vulnerable to a new faith just at this time. The conquests of the Roman armies had upset social structures all around the Mediterranean region, and millions of individuals had lost the support systems that had sustained them. It was a time of social chaos. Slaves, soldiers, and free individuals found themselves leaving their places of birth and going to distant parts of the empire, partly because they were forced to do so, partly because the *pax romana* now made it possible for them to do so. The cities especially received a constant stream of newcomers, people who had no attachments to anyone and who were open to establishing new relationships. Christian groups saw this opportunity and were quick to reach out to those who were longing for companionship and friendships.

Life in the cities, however, suffered from more than social problems. Cities were terribly overcrowded, and living conditions were abysmal. You read about how the Romans had sewers, sanitation and public baths, but these did not serve the vast majority of the inhabitants. The following picture of city life has been culled from numerous sources:

Given limited water and means of sanitation, and the incredible density of humans and animals, most people in Greco-Roman cities must have lived in filth beyond imagining. Tenement cubicles were smoky, dark, often damp, and always dirty. The smell of sweat, urine, feces, and decay permeated everything ... Outside on the street it was little better. Mud, open sewers, manure, and crowds. In fact, human corpses -- adult as well as infant -- were sometimes just pushed into the street and abandoned....The stench of these cities must have been overpowering for many miles -- especially in warm weather -- and even the richest Romans must have suffered. No wonder they were fond of incense. Moreover, Greco-Roman cities must have been smothered in flies, mosquitoes, and other insects that flourish where there is much stagnant water and exposed filth.³⁸

These wretched conditions provided Christians with at least two opportunities. First, the obvious consequence of all this filth was disease, and Christians, as already noted, were willing to care for the sick. Terrible plagues struck the empire in the middle of the second and third centuries, and Christians took advantage of these opportunities to touch the lives of those who were suffering. Secondly, with more non-Christians dying from disease than Christians, it was non-Christians who were more frequently left without family members and friends. This increased the likelihood that they would form new relationships with Christians, especially if they had witnessed the loving care that had been given to the sick and dying.

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.³⁹

In short, Christians had and took advantage of opportunities to go forward in Christ with their faith and in their lives. As question for us is, “Do we find comparable opportunities today to make a similar impact on the non-Christian world?”

³⁸ Stark, pp. 153-154.

³⁹ Stark, p. 161.

T = THREATS

We said at the outset that the church's struggles were not against flesh and blood, but against the devil and those earthly allies that he used to try to destroy the Gospel. The growth of the church may have been "astounding" and "amazing," but it was not without its difficulties. Among those difficulties were false teachings that threatened the Gospel and the persecutions that threatened the very life of the church.

Gnosticism was the first major threat to the Gospel. Gnosticism was not a carefully defined, unified system that directly attacked orthodox Christianity and tried to destroy it. Rather, it worked from within and claimed to have the true understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus. Actually it was not even Christian in origin, but it tried to incorporate Christian elements into its pre-Christian speculations. It claimed to possess a secret knowledge that enabled those who were "in the know" to understand the hidden workings of the universe and to escape the grasp of the world of matter. All that was physical was evil, and the goal of the Gnostics was to be set free from this physical world by means of spiritual enlightenment. This enlightenment could come from various sources, and Jesus was supposed to be one of the revealers. But since matter was evil, Jesus could not have been a true human being. And the God of the Old Testament could not be the ultimate source of spiritual wisdom because he was the creator of this evil world. There was a higher god than this "demiurge" who had brought matter into being. Salvation could come about when your spirit was set free from being contaminated by matter, and in Christian-Gnostic circles, this took place through Christ the redeemer. Some Gnostics took an ascetic direction in an effort to reject the physical, while others turned to unrestrained debauchery since they believed that their spiritual nature could not be corrupted by the physical.

Gnosticism was a threat to the Gospel because it rejected the historical foundations of Christianity. Its god was not the God of the Old Testament, "the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." (This phrase was probably included in the Creed as a reaction against Gnosticism.) Its Christ was not born a true human being, did not suffer and die for human sin, and did not physically rise from the dead. And its salvation was limited to just a few, those who were capable of being enlightened with this secret knowledge. Gnosticism appealed to some of the brightest teachers of the church in the second century, especially those who were trying to make Christianity harmonize with the philosophies and religious speculations of the day. Marcion adhered to several of the doctrines of the Gnostics, and for a time he had an extensive following. In fact, there was a period when elements of Gnosticism may have held the majority view in Christian circles and among Christian leaders.⁴⁰ If Christianity had been absorbed into the Gnostic mindset, the Gospel would have been lost.

Another threat to orthodoxy in the late second century was Montanism, named after Montanus of Phrygia in Asia Minor. These were the revivalists and charismatics of the day. They believed that the Spirit was no longer moving the church, that prophetic utterances had died out, that Christians had become lax and worldly, and that the expectation of the soon return of Christ had disappeared. Montanus claimed to be the mouthpiece of the Paraclete; he spoke in tongues; and he and two prophetesses said that the Spirit had revealed to them that Jesus would return soon and set up His earthly millennial kingdom. Therefore believers were urged to greater strictness in living, celibacy and fasting were enjoined, and martyrdom was highly honored.

The Montanist movement was especially strong in Asia Minor and North Africa, but it was also found far to the west. The most prominent convert to Montanism was Tertullian of Carthage, a great teacher and defender of orthodoxy, but a man whose passion was strict asceticism and discipline in the church. Like Montanus, he was concerned that so many in the church seemed to have lost their enthusiasm for the faith and were failing to live dedicated Christian lives. Given its background and beginnings, it was natural that legalism and work righteousness were strong features of Montanism, but opposition to it in the church catholic came primarily because of its claims that the Holy Spirit was continuing to speak through them and not through "authorized" channels.

Besides these and other false doctrines, the other main threat to the church was persecution. The one thing that most people "know" about the early years of the Christian church, even if they don't know anything

⁴⁰ Latourette, p. 123.

else, is that Christians were persecuted for their faith. Jesus had told his disciples that those who followed him would be forced to take up their own crosses. He said, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). Paul told the new believers in Asia Minor that “we must go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Paul himself experienced many of those hardships (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23ff.).

The first persecutions came from Jews such as Saul of Tarsus, but this persecution was quite limited. The destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the Jewish State pretty much ended Judaism’s power to stop the forward progress of the Gospel.

More troublesome by far were the Roman persecutions, beginning with Nero in 64 AD and ending with Diocletian in 303 AD. The earlier of these persecutions were often localized, and there were long periods of toleration between occasional outbursts. Most of the time there was little effort by the government to persecute Christians, and when the effort was made, it was especially the bishops and prominent leaders who were singled out. For the first 250 years ordinary Christians were free to do pretty much as they wished in most places and most of the time as far as the government was concerned. There was an incident in second century Asia Minor where a governor began a persecution of Christians, and the entire Christian population of the region marched around his house in protest. Not only did they have the nerve to protest, but they also went unpunished.⁴¹ There is the well-known letter (c.112 AD) from Pliny the Younger to Emperor Trajan, asking whether his cautious and relatively tolerant treatment of Christians was acceptable. Trajan commended Pliny for his approach, specifically saying, “they are not to be sought out.”⁴² When action was taken against members of the church, it was usually at the instigation of citizens, not the government.

There were, however, some notable executions in the early years. Peter and Paul apparently were martyred in Rome during the time of Nero, according to Clement of Rome. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (d. 115), Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (d. 155), and Justin Martyr (d. 165) were other prominent victims. We probably know the names of most of those who lost their lives prior to the year 250 because they were highly revered in the church, and the stories of their bravery and steadfastness were told and retold to encourage others to stand fast. Detailed accounts of the martyrdoms of Polycarp⁴³ and Justin Martyr⁴⁴ have been preserved and make for inspiring reading.

There were, however, two especially painful and dangerous times for Christians in the third century. The first began during the reign of Decius (249-251). It has been conjectured that as conditions in the empire deteriorated, there was a yearning for the “good old days” when the empire was strong and its citizens virtuous. What had gone wrong? One noticeable change was that fewer and fewer people were paying attention to the temples of the gods and to traditional religion. And so there was a feeling that they needed to turn back the clock and revive the old institutions. It was a movement not unlike the desire in our own day to make our nation strong and moral again by reintroducing prayer in public schools, posting the Ten Commandments in public places, and displaying religious slogans like “in God We Trust.”

So it was that in 249 AD Decius decreed that all citizens were required to sacrifice to the ancient gods. Those who obeyed were given a certificate saying that they had complied. Non-Christians had no trouble complying, even if they considered it a joke. But for Christians it was another matter. To sacrifice was apostasy, and apostasy was a sin that was considered unforgivable. Some Christians capitulated and saved their lives. Others purchased fraudulent certificates from dishonest officials without actually performing the sacrifices. Others fled to places of safety. But many steadfastly refused to sacrifice and were tortured, imprisoned, or killed outright. Even though Decius fell in battle after only two years, the persecutions continued for several more years.

In Rome the Bishop was taken while teaching seated in his chair in one of the catacombs and, with four of his seven deacons, was slain. The other three deacons were also soon caught and

⁴¹ Stark, p. 192.

⁴² Bettenson, Henry, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 7.

⁴³ Bettenson, 13ff.

⁴⁴ Oetting, p. 123ff.

killed. One, Lawrence, is said to have been roasted on a gridiron. In Africa Cyprian was beheaded ...In Spain a bishop who was reported to have been greatly beloved by both Christians and non-Christians was burned at a stake in an amphitheatre with two of his deacons.⁴⁵

Then, suddenly, the persecution stopped and there was another period of toleration. But now the church had to deal with the question of what to do with those who had lapsed. Some were disposed to grant forgiveness and readmittance to the Eucharist when a sinner was genuinely penitent, and there were various efforts to try to determine when true penitence had taken place. But others deplored the growing laxity among Christians, and they saw the willingness to readmit the lapsed as another unfortunate step in that direction. Tertullian had earlier listed “blasphemy” as one of the seven deadly sins, and he was unwilling to allow for a second repentance in such serious cases. During and after the Decian persecutions, Novatian, a prominent Roman theologian, held that the church could not grant forgiveness to those who had denied the faith, although he held out hope that God might yet grant them that forgiveness in eternity. He and others feared that leniency in this matter would cause Christians not to take their lapses seriously. A split in the church occurred when Novatian was bypassed to replace the recently martyred bishop of Rome by a man who was prepared to forgive the lapsed. Some of those who shared Novatian’s hard-line views then chose him as an opposition bishop. Novatianists considered themselves the “pure church” to distinguish themselves from the more lenient majority church. Anyone connected with the majority church had to be re-baptized when joining a Novatian congregation, agreeing that they were only now becoming members of the true church. Novatianism was similar to other movements, including Pietism, that have tried to create a “pure” church by means of strict demands in the areas of repentance and sanctification. It is possible that the phrase “I believe in the forgiveness of sins” was added to the Apostles’ Creed at this time in reaction to those who withheld forgiveness from the lapsed.⁴⁶ The forgiveness of sins is the great treasure of the church. Although it should not be granted frivolously, it also should not be withheld from those who have confessed their sins. We always need to beware of legalistic methods to try to create a pure church.

The final great persecution of the church began in the year 303 during the reign of Diocletian (284-305). His motive again seems to have been an effort to return Rome to its former glory by reviving the old religion. Diocletian ordered the destruction of church buildings, the burning of sacred books, the demotion of Christians from positions of importance, and the imprisonment of church leaders. Those imprisoned were offered release if they would sacrifice to the old gods, and those who refused were tortured. Apparently the death penalty was inflicted only as a last resort; after all, there were too many Christians to kill them all. But the torture could be so severe that many died as a result. Once again, some recanted under pressure, some had their pagan friends sacrifice for them, but great numbers stood firm and accepted the fate the government imposed on them. The willingness of some to accept martyrdom is reflected in an earlier letter of Ignatius to the church at Rome when he was on his way to that city to meet his death. Ignatius wrote:

Grant me no more than that you let my blood be spilled in sacrifice to God ...I am writing to all the churches and state emphatically to all that I die willingly for God, provided you do not interfere. I beg you, do not show me unseasonable kindness. Suffer me to be the food of wild beasts, which are the means of making my way to God. God’s wheat I am, and by the teeth of wild beasts I am to be ground that I may prove Christ’s pure bread.⁴⁷

People like this were completely convinced that their future was secure in the hands of their Savior who had given his life for them. They had learned from what the Apostle Paul had written to the Colossians, that “I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body” (Colossians 1:24). Christians were “his body” in the world, and now they

⁴⁵ Latourette, p. 89.

⁴⁶ Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *Christianity Through the Ages*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 48.

⁴⁷ Ignatius. *Epistle to the Romans*.

were experiencing what Christ had experienced from a hostile world. Although the church later made a point of discouraging intentional martyrdoms, it is apparent that some were more than willing to “depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” (Philippians 1:23). But it finally became evident that Christianity was not going to go away. It had faced all the powers of the Roman government and emerged victorious. When Constantine became leader of the western half of the empire at the battle of Milvian Bridge near Rome, he attributed his victory to the sign of the cross that he said he saw in the sky. Soon thereafter Christianity moved from being a persecuted religion to an officially tolerated religion to the favored religion of the empire. Whether that benefited the church or harmed the church is still being debated.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

At the dawn of each millennium of its existence, the Christian church, in its visible form, has had its strengths and its weaknesses. Christians living today can look back 2000 years and wish that today’s church could reclaim some of the freshness and commitment that is evident in the life of the early church. On the other hand, those early Christians, for all their vitality and heroic loyalty to Christ, could have benefited from the clarity of definition and understanding of the Gospel that 2000 years of study and experience have taught the church. We hope and pray that this clarity is not again being lost.

The world has certainly changed since God determined that it was the right time to send His Son. And the Gospel, with all its ethical applications, has been the positive agent for a great deal of that change. But I would suggest that in some ways the church has become the victim of its own success. Western civilization may not acknowledge the Christian roots of many of its virtues and ideals, but the unique Christian ideals of the early centuries have become the accepted ideals, at least in theory, of most of the people in the western world. The result is that Christians today do not stand out from others when they build hospitals, care for the sick and the poor, oppose cruelty, and expect to go to heaven when they die. Those were some of the keys that contributed to the success of the church in the first three centuries. But today non-Christians do these things as well as and often better than Christians (except go to heaven!). And today most people think they are going to heaven anyway, so it is difficult to excite them with the Good News of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

So what do we need to do or be or stand for in today’s environment that will enable the church to continue to go forward in Christ? Really, the only tool that we have and need is the tool the early church also had, but did not always use well, namely, the Gospel. As familiar as it is to us in this room, the Gospel of God’s forgiveness in Christ is not clearly understood by the vast majority, including, unfortunately, some in our own churches. It is so easy to become enamored with the fruits of the Gospel that the Gospel itself can lose its attraction. That happened in the early church. It happens in many Christian churches today. If we are going to go forward in Christ, it must be with the Gospel. If we do that,

The Church shall never perish, Her dear Lord, to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish, Is with her to the end.
Though there be those that hate her And strive to see her fail,
Against both foe and traitor She ever shall prevail.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Samuel J. Stone. “The Church’s One Foundation,” *Christian Worship-A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 538:4.

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