

Evangelism through the Centuries:

Focusing on the Apostolic Church, the Church in Early America and the Contemporary Church

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I. What is Evangelism in Light of the New Testament and the History of the Church?

A: Good News (“*euaggelion*”): refers to the events recorded in the gospels, and the act of announcing those events. The subject of the good news is both “the kingdom,” and Jesus himself. Jesus is the content of the good news, what Origin called the *autobasileia*, the kingdom embodied in a person. The purpose of evangelism is “to perpetuate the knowledge of Christ’s sojourn upon earth” and to bring about knowledge of Christ “as a present reality in those souls which were willing to receive the Word of God as he stood at the door and knocked and sought to come into them.”

B: Proclamation (“*kerugma*”): refers to the message that comes from a herald (or preacher)—a common pattern of evangelistic preaching . This “pattern of sound words” (2 Tim. 1.13) in the early church was united in its content regarding Jesus and urgent in the demand for a decision.

C: Witness (“*martureo*”): refers to a legal witness to events and to truths vouched for by the personal involvement and assurance of the person making the witness. Such a witness was connected with first-hand testimony. Eye-witnesses would bear testimony that they had believed, and that the “new life” was true in their own experience. Christians came to understand that when “second-hand” disciples have a faith encounter with Jesus, then they are no longer “disciples at second-hand” but themselves become first-hand disciples. “Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony (“*memartureken*”) in themselves” (1 John 5.10).

II. Evangelism in the Early Church

A: Evangelistic Means

1. ***Pax Romana*:** Under Caesar Augustus, the entire known world was governed by a single entity. Peace not only allowed citizens the opportunity to travel safely over long distances, but it also allowed quick travel through the development of Roman roads.
2. **Greek Culture:** Greek Language became the common-tongue of the empire, which allowed the gospel to be shared quickly throughout the Roman Empire. Greek thought had previously laid the theological foundations in its language and through its philosophy which Christianity then used in its writing of the gospels and in its apologetic work. Greek cults in Roman culture also provided a place where people could find cleansing, security, and promised immortality.

3. **Jewish Religion:** Many consider Jewish culture as a forerunner for Christianity. The Roman world held an interest in the influence of Jewish monotheism.

B: Evangelistic Motives

1. **A Sense of Gratitude:** Early Christians shared Jesus because of an overwhelming experience of the love of God and the life of Jesus.
2. **A Sense of Responsibility:** Early Christians understood that their lives were lived under the eye of God and that they ought to please God in everything that they did because God is a Sovereign Judge.
3. **A Sense of Concern:** Early Christians had great concern for the unevangelized because of the concept of evil permeating all of humanity and Jesus was the sole answer to the problem of evil. Only through Jesus could an individual find God and escape the dangerous traps of evil.
4. **A Sense of Urgency:** The eschatological expectation of an imminent return of Jesus influenced Christians to spread the gospel quickly. The Holy Spirit was seen as an eschatological gift, a foretaste of God's future, and what equipped Christians for world mission. Since God is sovereign, bringing in the Kingdom in God's way and time, and is the Creator and Redeemer of the whole world, early Christians were convinced that they ought to spread the gospel to Jews and Gentiles.

C: Evangelistic Methods

1. **Public Evangelism:** The synagogue was the main public place for the evangelism of the Jews because anyone was allowed to read and or exposit Scripture. In addition, early Christians followed the lead of Jesus in practicing open-air preaching in places where many people were present like temple area or market place. Through proclamation, education, and testimony early Christians publicly shared their faith.
2. **Household Evangelism:** The relatively small number of individuals allowed early Christians to create an informal and hospitable dialogue where the gospel could be shared successfully. From a sociological standpoint, the conversion of an entire household was important because it was a fundamental unit in society and a 'lighthouse' for the gospel to spread to other families. The house also became the meeting place for Christian community.
3. **Personal Evangelism:** An individual felt compelled to pass on the gospel one on one, friend to friend, and through personal encounter settings. One would knock on doors like Ananias in hopes that by visiting, he or she would gain a convert. In the case of Gregory and Origen, contextualizing the gospel in a relationship also proved fruitful.
4. **Literary Evangelism:** The gospels (perhaps with Matthew being an exception) were written for the purpose of telling the story of Jesus to unbelievers. Second Century writers used literature to present arguments for the rationality of Christian Faith and to attack the foundations of opposing beliefs. The early Christian's hope was that the unbeliever would be led to read Scripture and come to know Christ through it.

III. Evangelism in 18th-19th Century America

A: Evangelistic Means

1. ***Pax Americana***: One colonial power (Britain) and then, later, one political entity (the United States) allowed for ease of movement and the spread of ideas throughout the American continent. The frontier allowed for expansion and evangelistic innovation.
2. **Religious Denominationalism**: Both cooperation and rivalry resulted from this new conception of ecclesiology—the practical outworking of the principle of religious toleration.
3. **Enlightenment Ideology/Modernity**: The search for liberty resulted in an emphasis on the freedom of conscience, disestablishment, human progress, freewill, human rights, democratization in church life and religious experimentation.

B: Evangelistic Motives

1. **A Vision of a “Christian America”**: Church leaders tried to shape culture so that American society would be thoroughly Christian, an implicit “establishment.”

2. **A Vision of Christian Holiness**: Christians believed that God desired the Church to be holy. Both individuals and, by extrapolation, all of society should be sanctified. Evangelistic efforts were directed toward purifying believers as well as converting unbelievers.

3. **A Vision of an Optimistic Culmination to History**: A postmillennial eschatological interpretation caused Christians to hope that a Christianized America would lead the way toward the conversion of the entire world. Negatively, this vision led to “manifest destiny.” Positively, it led to social reforms, such as abolitionism, temperance, and women’s rights. See *They Walked in the Spirit: Personal Faith and Social Action in America* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997).

C. Evangelistic Methods

1. **Revivalism**: This new method of evangelism caught the imagination of people throughout America, fulfilling their millennial hopes and blessings. Almost all Protestants, and many Roman Catholics, too, were caught up in the revivalistic fervor of the period. Specific methods included:

- a. Evangelistically-focused Preachers, known as “**Revivalists**”: e.g. George Whitefield, Jarena Lee, Charles Finney.
- b. **Camp Meetings**: interdenominational and biracial.
- c. The “**Invisible Institution**” (brush arbors) among African Americans.

2. **Circuit Riders and Class Meetings**: used particularly by Methodists, but others also.

3. **Voluntary Societies**: A “benevolent empire” of transdenominational, task-oriented para-church organizations developed for evangelism and the implementation of the goal of a “Christian America.” These organizations included the American Bible Society, the American Sunday School

Union, the American Tract Society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and the American Anti-Slavery Society.

4. **Publications:** Inexpensive printing techniques led to the easy and mass spread of ideas, through books and newspapers, which assisted in the dissemination of the gospel message.

IV. Evangelism in the Contemporary Church

A: Evangelistic Means

1. **Globalization and Mobility.** Because the “world is flat,” concepts and personalities are disseminated with unprecedented ease, though it has also diffused ecclesial identity. The vast movement of people has created new occasions for churches around the country. People who move into new communities look for ways to connect with others. Ethnic diversity has increased dramatically in American society and will continue to do so in the 21st century.

2. **The Communications Revolution:** The advent of the internet and social networking has provided an opening for Christian evangelism, though it has also brought with it the spread of non-Christian religions.

3. **Postmodernity:** Though some Christians view postmodernism as a threat to a Christian worldview, others see it as an opportunity for proclaiming the gospel in a new and fresh way.

B. Evangelistic Motives

Many observers think that evangelistic motives are not strong in today’s church. There is an absence of a sense of concern or a sense of eschatological urgency. Do we need to recover God’s vision for the future of a redeemed humanity and a renewed creation (2 Corinthians 5.17, Romans 8.22-23)? Do we need to be reinvigorated by the idea that God’s mission of the Church is to be a sent community (John 20.21-22) to restore the world to the divine image (Colossians 3.10)?

C. Evangelistic Methods

1. **The Mega-Church model:** Many seem to feel that this model is dated.

2. **The Emerging Church model:** This model has both advocates and critics.

3. The promise of **Multi-Ethnic Christian communities.** People of color in the United States (as elsewhere in the world) are becoming the majority of Christians and provide hope for the resurgence of Christian growth.