

# How The World Was Won

Jon Garvey examines the methods of evangelism common in the Early Church

**When we discuss the best ways to proclaim Christ, we shouldn't think only of today's or yesterday's methods. "Decision evangelism" and "Process evangelism" are not the only methods of spreading the gospel, and may not even be the best. Should we not also consider how the Holy Spirit worked during the most dramatic period of the Church's growth – the early centuries?**

Those centuries saw, in terms of numbers, the winning over of most of the Roman Empire, and many beyond. In terms of lifestyle, they saw a righteousness and love which revolutionised both family and state. In terms of endurance they saw thousands willing to die for Christ. In terms of miracles, they saw a power that astounded a world accustomed to pagan wonder-working. In terms of wisdom they saw an intellectual framework that rendered Greek philosophy obsolete. These things surely make the early Church's evangelistic methods worth a glance, at least! Fortunately, there is a wealth of information in the writings of the Church Fathers to help us on these matters.

## The Methods

**I**t is clear that all kinds of different things happening among God's people helped win people to Christ. The pagan critic of Christianity, Celsus, complained towards the end of

the second century of groups of Christians gathering in the market-places to trick the ignorant with their words<sup>1</sup>. So clearly public evangelism was occurring. But at the same time he bemoaned the fact that servants were trying to persuade the younger members of the family to ignore their parents and follow Christ<sup>2</sup>. Obviously personal evangelism was common as well.

Not long afterwards, Tertullian described how wives often won over their unbelieving husbands by their lifestyle (and conversely, how Christians who deliberately chose to marry unbelievers usually failed to win them – a

Finally, intellectual Christians engaged in debate, both personally and in writing, with other philosophers. If they hadn't we would have had no record of any of these things. For example Justin came to faith through the persuasion of an old Christian philosopher he met whilst out walking by the sea<sup>6</sup>.

## The Message

**W**e may recognise in these accounts pre-echoes of present-day examples, from Billy Graham to Derek Prince, or from *Alpha* to *Person to Person*. But the records show that, whatever the medium, it was the unchanging nature of

***Whatever the medium, it was the unchanging nature of the Gospel message itself that made their evangelism a powerful work of the Spirit rather than just a series of fashionable techniques***

lesson for today as well)<sup>3</sup>. Even outside the family, the business ethics of believers had a strong evangelistic effect, as Justin Martyr recorded<sup>4</sup>.

Supernatural gifts were still in evidence. Several writers challenged their pagan readers to account for the success of quite humble believers in exorcising demons, and forcing spirits which claimed to be gods to admit that there were in fact devils<sup>5</sup>. These were undeniable public events.

the gospel message itself that made their evangelism a powerful work of the Spirit rather than just a series of fashionable techniques.

So Origen, answering the criticism of Celsus, said of the public meetings, '*we try to bring forward publicly in our discussions those things among us which are especially excellent and divine when we have plenty of intelligent hearers.*'<sup>1</sup> In the same way, defending those who witnessed in their families, he said, '*... we*

turn women away from a dissolute life, from arguing with those they live with, from all mad desires after theatres and dancing [!] and from superstition. Meanwhile we train in the habit of self-restraint teenage boys feeling the desire for sexual pleasures, pointing out to them not only the disgrace which attends those sins, but also the state to which the soul of the wicked is reduced through those practices, and the judgements which it will suffer, and the punishments which will be inflicted.<sup>2</sup>

Wives witnessed to their husbands not only by their lives, but by their words. Note how similar to the last quotation is the example of a wife mentioned by Justin, who 'endeavoured to persuade her husband to be temperate, citing the teaching of Christ, and assuring him that there shall be punishment in eternal fire inflicted upon those who do not live temperately and conform to right reason.'<sup>7</sup>

Central to exorcism, too, was a message rather than a mere display of spiritual power. Origen said, 'For it is not by incantations that Christians are seen to prevail, but by the name of Jesus, accompanied by the announcement of the narratives which relate to him.'<sup>8</sup>

And even in philosophical discussion, the intellectuals pointed out the shortcomings of the Greek philosophers and directed their hearers to the Old Testament prophets and to the Person and Work of Jesus. When the early Christians proclaimed Christ, they didn't preach for decisions, but for discipline. They didn't try to show that Christians are the same as everybody else, but that Christ changes them into something new. They didn't

follow after ever more spectacular gifts of supernatural power, but regarded faith as the most important gift of all. As one writer said, 'this very thing, to have been delivered from the impiety of polytheism, and to have believed in God the Father through Christ, this is a gift of God'<sup>9</sup>.

**R**epentance; faith in God through the risen, historic Jesus; a life lived in obedience to Christ as Lord; and the warning of judgement at God's hands for disobedience – these were the core of the message that transformed the world. It was expressed neatly by Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, who learned his faith from the apostle John himself. He wrote to the church at Philippi; 'So gird up your loins now and serve God in fear and sincerity. No more of the empty talk and errors of the multitude; put your trust in him who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and gave him glory and a seat at his own right hand. All things in heaven and earth have been made subject to him. Everything that breathes pays him homage. He comes to judge the living and the dead, and God will require his blood at the hands of any who refuse him allegiance. And he that raised him from the dead will raise us also, if we do his will and live by his commandments, and cherish the things he cherished'<sup>10</sup>. How closely does the evangelism in your church match that? **PT**

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 23; Origen, *op. cit.*, 1.6, 7.4

<sup>6</sup> Justin Martyr, *op. cit.*, 3-8

<sup>7</sup> Justin Martyr, 2<sup>nd</sup>

*Apology*, 2

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *op. cit.*, 1.6

<sup>9</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions*, 8.1

<sup>10</sup> Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 2

\* All references from Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1970.

<sup>1</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3.52

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 3.55

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *To his Wife*, 2.7

<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, 1<sup>st</sup> *Apology*, 16