

A Brief History of Christian Evangelism V, The First One Hundred Year of Christianity

By Victor Beshir

Christianity in the first century was the most beautiful icon of Christianity. During this period we have seen the characteristics of the church of Christ in its fullness. It lived as the Lord planned for it with no deviation from its objectives both on the communal and individual levels. This church is considered as the module for all the periods of the Christian church, and that's why I delayed talking about it until the end of this series. It is sad to report that starting from the Fourth century the church began to lose its pure characteristics as a result of many factors that I am going to refer to in this article.

The Greatest Evangelist:

The first century of Christianity started with the birth of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, His evangelism, and then His death, resurrection, and ascension into the heaven. In this article, let us talk about the evangelism of our Lord Jesus Christ, which eventually would need many volumes to cover it, however, for our purpose here, I am going to talk briefly about:

The characteristics of His evangelism:

1- Since the purpose of His first mission was His 'His own' (John 1: 11), i.e., the Jewish people in their land of Israel, **He incarnated and lived in Israel since childhood till the time He appeared to Israel (John 1:31). Here is a good lesson for evangelists. They need to comprehend not only the language of the region they are going to evangelize but also the culture.** Here, He set the best example and the criteria for the best evangelism practice.

2- He worked as a carpenter and **lived among the poor people of the country, so He can see, touch, and feel the life reality of the majority of the population.** He did not live in an ivory tower, but was raised and lived as a poor person. This is a clear invitation for evangelists to be armed not only with the Gospel, but also with deep understanding of people's circumstances and needs, sharing their feelings, and their lives if possible.

3- **His evangelism was filled with an abundance of parables, examples, words, and vivid images of the culture that every one of His audiences could identify with easily.** Nothing in His teaching was foreign for His audience. His words were understood by the poorest and the uneducated as well as the richest and the highly educated. He gave a great example of not forgetting the poor and uneducated, a mistake commonly repeated by many evangelists in every age. The power of His message was not in using eloquent language or philosophy, but rather it was in the power of the Spirit that initiated and accompanied the teaching.

4- When He selected His disciples and apostles, **He chose them from the same culture, and not from a foreign culture,** another indication of the importance of appointing persons who live in and understand the culture and consequently can identify with the people of that culture.

5- His work was **seed planting.** For over three years, the Lord did not invite people to attend a specific church, neither had He built a church. He planted seeds of salvation in the hearts of the

people. His apostles, after His ascension, established the churches. Many evangelists are troubled when they do not see direct and quick results of their own efforts, while the Lord may be using them only for seed planting.

6- Power of **prayers and fasting**: The Lord gave Himself as an example of an evangelist. He spent the nights in prayers and the days in preaching and meeting people. This is the source of power for evangelism. He started His service by fasting for forty days and forty nights. The lesson here is to depend on God's power and not on our own wisdom, and achieve that through the power of prayers and fasting.

7- His evangelism was very focused on *the important aspects of evangelism*:

a- Christianity is based on **the "Faith,"** as a fundamental requirement (review the Sermon on the Mountain). In Orthodoxy today many are afraid to talk about faith, because some Orthodox considers 'faith' as Protestantism's tenant. Faith is a very essential requirement of evangelism. We cannot succeed in evangelism until we can talk and ask about 'faith' freely.

b- Invitation to **'Repentance.'** Repentance is the beginning of a spiritual life and it continues to strengthen the spirituality. We can't just become teachers, but we have to continue to call people to repentance. They called the Lord 'teacher,' but this did not stop Him from calling them to repentance.

c- Eschatological aspect: 'From that time (His baptism) Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17). The Gospel is full of His teaching about heaven, the kingdom of God, the last day, and the judgment, using words, vivid parables, and prophecies. I do not exaggerate if I say that the eschatological aspect of His teaching was the main core of His work.

d- Showed great love, care, intimacy, respect, interest in individuals and dealt with them with **mercy** and **humility**. This is a clear invitation for all Christian servants to follow His lead in how to respect, love, and care for individuals. When we serve the multitudes, we tend to be less appreciative of individuals' needs, which is a grave sin in evangelism.

e- Rejecting worldly riches, honor from others, or authority over others. 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you: but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.' (Matt 20:25-28). No one will forget when the Master washed His disciples' feet. [History shows us that weakness started to creep into the church when the church or its servants started to seek materialistic richness or to exercise authority over others].

f- Deep understanding of religion and its applications: Any reader of the Gospel will easily recognize the continuous courageous attempts of the Lord to go beyond the rituals and the laws to show that they were all created for man and not to be a burden on man. If you recall the importance of sacrifices in the Old Testament, you know what kind of a challenge He had when He declared 'I need mercy and not sacrifice.' Today, Orthodox evangelists need to draw the attention to the purpose and depth of the ecclesiastical rites, and to proclaim them as spiritual means and not as objectives in themselves.

g- Obedience: All His service was a manifestation of continuous obedience to His Father. He waited for His Father's declaration on His baptism before starting His service, although He could have started His mission earlier. He obeyed until death on the cross, in self-denial and sacrifice.

The Church of the Apostles:

When the Jews rejected the Gospel and it became obvious that the message should be directed to the Gentiles, we notice how on the Pentecost Day **the Holy Spirit prepared the apostles for evangelism through giving them the ability to speak the languages of all the nations known at this time.** This shows us the basic fundamental requirement of evangelism, speaking the language.

The Characteristics of Evangelism in the Apostles' Period:

1- Evangelism was the main objective of the church. The Lord left the church with a great commission "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved: but he who does not believe will be condemned." Therefore, the great commission of the church was very clear, to evangelize. The apostles did exactly that, and even when the numbers of the faithful reached tens of thousands, they never replaced evangelism with pastoral care, social services, construction, or any other activities. **They were well focused on evangelism.** When there was a need for a social service, they asked the people to elect seven men to perform this service, and to let them, the apostles, concentrate on evangelism and prayers (Acts 6:1-6). Today also, the Orthodox Church needs to focus again on the great commission left to her by the Lord, making it her top priority.

2- Evangelism was not only the objective of the apostles but also of all the believers. Everybody in the church regarded evangelism as an important objective. Evangelism started with the person's baptism, when he would start feeling the light of the grace. Then it was reinforced weekly when he/she received the holy communion, as they kept their eyes focused on the Lord's commandment: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). We see this clearly after the great persecution that followed the martyrdom of St. Stephan when the faithful were forced to leave Jerusalem. We read: "Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). In the Orthodox Church, we need to raise the awareness of the importance of the believers' evangelism.

3- Salvation was a target for evangelism. The objective was not just to preach, educate, or tell the story of Jesus, but rather it was 'salvation.' Not everyone joined the church, but only those who were saved "**And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved**" (Acts 2:47). Currently, in our churches we are afraid of speaking about salvation because of fear that we may be labeled as Protestants, a practice that we need to abandon in evangelism.

4- Faith was a requirement to join the church. In the book of Acts, we read about so many incidents in which there were direct correlation between salvation and faith, such as in: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Therefore, faith was a requirement for baptism. No one could be baptized without faith, and no one was saved without baptism.

5- The Holy Spirit directed the evangelism efforts. We have read about the invitation of the Holy Spirit of Barnabas and Paul "the Holy Spirit said: "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). The book of acts showed us how the Holy Spirit was the leader in all evangelistic efforts.

6- Planting Churches: The apostles traveled from one city to another, proclaiming the Gospel, and baptizing people. Staying in each city only long enough to ordain priests and deacons from

the indigenous. The apostles delivered the faith and established churches, ordaining clergy from the people for the people. They delivered faith, prayers, and means of worship, but not culture.

7- Evangelists were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. The lives of the faithful were characterized by joy and peace, fruits that result from a genuine feeling of the work of the grace in their lives. Their lives were drastically different from those who were not saved, which attracted the unsaved. Evangelists were not only filled with joy but also filled of the continuous pouring of the Holy Spirit on them, “And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52).

8- The church was a church of prayer. Prayer was the source of power for this church. From this church we learned about **the great power of the “spontaneous prayers”** “And when they had prayed, **the place where they were assembled together was shaken: and they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness’** (Acts 4:31). Nowadays many tend to belittle the spontaneous prayer meetings and label them as an act of Protestantism. In evangelism, we need to restore the ‘spontaneous prayer meetings.’ We also need to refer to the pure heavenly liturgical life they lived, which filled their hearts with ‘gladness and simplicity of heart’ (Acts 2:46).

9- A church of unity. ‘Now the multitude of those who believed were one heart and one soul’ (Acts 4:31). This verse is just one example of numerous verses that talk about the unity of this church. They loved each other deeply. The rich brought their money to the apostles and distributed it to everyone, as he needed (Acts 4: 32-37).

An Insight into the Church of the Apostles:

This church never imposed any cultural aspects on any nation or community. Although most of the apostles were raised in Israel, however, when they preached the gospel, we did not hear about any application of Israel’s culture on any church, a lesson that we need to learn when we try to evangelize in the Western countries. Their objective was preaching the Gospel, trusting that the power of the Gospel will change people’s lives. It is appropriate to say that this church was one that never delivered any aspects of culture. It is a grave mistake when the church tries to deliver culture instead of pure and strong salvation. Sometimes, because of the cultural ties in the church, we think that the spirituality of the church exists in all these cultural aspects. However, the apostolic period corrects us. Here is a church that is greatest in spirituality because its people lived the Gospel and filled with the Holy Spirit without any help of the cultural aspects that are available today in the church. The Orthodox Church needs to discern faith from cultural aspects.

1- The apostles **concentrated on the essence of salvation:** faith, repentance, baptism, etc. Their major interest was to establish a church that embraces the multitudes of saved people who show the fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives, because of burying the old man and living in the newness of life in Christ. Compare this with some churches nowadays that may be full of people who are mostly not enjoying the fruits of salvation, because the old man still masters their lives.

2- It was an **Eschatological church.** The church was waiting for His second coming. The greeting among the believers was (Maran Atha = The Lord is coming), which inflamed the hearts with a great desire to be vigilant and to evangelize.

3- A poor church. It cast off all worldly riches, even though she was capable of collecting much wealth if she wanted. Christ never called the church to live in materialistic richness. He ordered

His disciple: “Take nothing for the journey, neither staffs nor bag nor bread nor money, and don’t have two tunics apiece” (Luke 9:3). Later on in the history when the church started to build up wealth and to live not according to the poverty of the gospel, the church lost the power of evangelism.

In conclusion, this church faithfully worked very hard in evangelism and succeeded in evangelizing most of the known civilized countries at the time. We need to devote more time to study the characteristics of this church as an introduction for us to learn about evangelism.



Now, I have come to the conclusion of this series on the ‘Brief History of Evangelism in the Orthodox Church.’ In this series, we followed the footsteps of our beloved Savior and our beloved fathers in their evangelistic efforts. The purpose was not to study the history alone, but to understand evangelism, to learn about practical evangelism and the thoughts behind evangelism that shaped all the evangelistic efforts and directed them.

You may use some of the approaches practiced by those great evangelists, but the main benefits of these lessons are to create a clear mindset for evangelism. This resembles an experienced traveler, who before traveling checks out the right roads and research the mistakes of others who traveled before him so he can avoid them. Therefore, following example of this ‘Brief history’ is important before we continue on exploring ‘how to evangelize.’ When you have questions, concerns, or ideas about evangelism, I hope you will come back to this history to find an answer or at least a guideline on how to deal with them. **As our church starts evangelism, it will need answers to hundreds of very essential questions. The answers would shape our evangelism efforts and direct them towards either success or failure, to build up a strong or a weak church. At that time, many would find in these history lessons a good mentor and a foundation to base a great ‘Theology of Mission’ for our Coptic Orthodox Church.**

Some references that I used in this study:

- 1- James J. Stamoolis, Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today, American Society of Missiology Series, No 10, Light and Life Publishing Company, 1986
- 2- Luke Alexander Veronis, Missionaries, Monks, and Martyrs, Making Disciples of All Nations, Light and Life Publishing Company, 1994.
- 3- Steven J. Sfekas, George E. Matsoukas, Projects For Orthodox Renewal, Seven Studies of Key Issues Facing Orthodox Christians In America, Orthodox Christian Laity Inc., 1993
- 4- H. Grace Bishop Antonius Markos, The Coptic Bishop of African Affairs, Come Across And Help Us, Book One and Book Two, Coptic Bishopric of African Affairs, 1988, 1996

In this study, I owe a great debt of gratitude to all the Americans who joined our Coptic Orthodox Church for a little while and then left her, not because of major shortcomings in our church’s faith or spirituality, - which they always considered to be the best they have ever seen,- but rather in our behavior, attitudes, directions, misunderstandings, culture, and thoughts. Their honest discussions opened my eyes to see our faults and pushed me to think and read for years. Many thoughts mentioned in these lessons came as fruits from this thinking and those conversations. Therefore, in a way, these lessons came with a high painful price that still saddens

my heart until today, their departure from our church. Sadly, we will continue to lose more people until we understand the lessons of this history. This is why it is so important to start our evangelism course with the history lessons first. I hope you will remember that winning people to Christ and to our church will largely depend on Copts' understanding of this history. As it was so crucial in the first church to have a clear understanding of Christianity to be able to accept the Gentiles, it would also be very crucial to our church to establish a good evangelism mindset in our church. It took a great turmoil in the church and a great council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) to open the doors to the Gentiles. Our church will need the same courage and discerning to open the doors of our church before others.