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Means of Evangelistic Growth: The First 300 Years

J.D. Payne¹

Though Christianity was initially understood as a sect of Judaism (Acts 24:5), within roughly three hundred years, it became a government-sanctioned religion. Even by the mid third century, the influence of the gospel could be felt in the highest offices in the land. For example, Cyprian's (A.D. 200-258) comments about the persecution of the believers reveals this widespread impact. Writing to Successus, he noted, "But the truth concerning them is as follows, that Valerian had sent a rescript to the Senate, to the effect that bishops and presbyters and deacons should immediately be punished; but that senators, and men of importance, and Roman knights, should lose their dignity, and moreover be deprived of their property; and if, when their means were taken away, they should persist in being Christians, then they should also lose their heads. . . . Moreover, people of Cesar's household, whoever of them had either confessed before, or should now confess, should have their property confiscated, and should be sent in chains by assignment to Cesar's estates."²

Purpose and Limitations

The purpose of this study is to examine the various means, by which the gospel spread across the world throughout the first three hundred years of the Church's existence. Many would agree with A. Cleveland Coxe, "For who does not close the records of St. Luke with longings to get at least a glimpse of the further history of the progress of the Gospel?"³ Though some biblical texts will be referenced, the primary focus of this study is upon the post-Apostolic, pre-Constantinian years. This study is descriptive in nature. Though contemporary secondary source literature will be consulted, I will draw predominantly from the

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historical documents written circa A.D. 100-300 and *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*. Following in the tradition of Adolf Harnack and Michael Green, primary source materials are referenced repeatedly throughout this work, thus, allowing the Early Church to speak for Herself.⁴

There are several limitations to this article. The first limitation is that I write primarily from the perspective of a missiologist rather than that of a Church historian. Time and space will prevent me from addressing topics that the historian would be quick to address. Second, very little attention will be given to the general socio-historical context of the world of the Early Church. Others have already written on this subject and should be consulted by those interested.⁵ Third, though I do believe that the Early Church was passionate about spreading the gospel, this study is not an attempt to address the degree of their evangelistic zeal, but rather to describe through what means the gospel did indeed spread.⁶

Fourth, whenever I use the word "means" I am referring to those both within *and* outside the control of the Church resulting in the spread of the gospel. For example, martyrdom was a way that the gospel spread, but a means outside of the Church's control. Fifth, it is my belief that there was a combination of a variety of means whereby the gospel spread throughout the world during this period of study. There is nothing remarkable about the methods mentioned in this work, but rather what was remarkable was the Early Church's "conviction, their passion and their determination to act as Christ's embassy to a rebel world, whatever the consequences."⁷

Sixth, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the content of the messages that were being proclaimed throughout the first three centuries of the Church's existence. Seventh, even within some of the fictitious writings (e.g., *Pseudo-Clementine Literature*), I believe that though the accuracy of the writings may be questioned at times there are still elements that *may* shed light on the means of how the gospel spread. Even writers of fiction are influenced by their culture. It is very possible that the examples of the characters in these narratives reveal patterns observed in the life of the Early Church. Finally, though there are probably other means by which the Church grew, in this work I have identified at least nine:

- Church Growth through Martyrdom
- Church Growth through Personal Evangelism
- Church Growth Through Open Air Preaching
- Church Growth Through Itinerants
- Church Growth Through Signs and Wonders

- Church Growth Through Public Discourse/Debate
- Church Growth Through Church Planting
- Church Growth Through Writings
- Church Growth Through Houses and *Oikos* Units

It is not my argument here that each of these means was widely accepted or commonly used means of spreading the gospel, but rather *they were used* for the expansion of the Kingdom. Ramsay MacMullen has argued that the growth of the Early Church was quite slow and that the faith was not as widespread as many post-A.D. 312/313 writers believed.⁸ His reason for this assumption is that there are too few Christian inscriptions before A.D. 313 to offer substantial historical evidence for a widespread expansion of the faith and a large number of believers.

According to MacMullen, not only were the writings few in number but their publication ceased for approximately a half a century prior to the early fourth century. When the Christians returned and took up the pen, it was post-A.D. 313 and then the Christians were prominent among the writings. "What happened?" MacMullen asked. "Merely, A.D. 312/313—that is, the prominence of Christians postdates and is explained by the grant of toleration."⁹ According to MacMullen, for the most part, Christians "kept quiet" for the two centuries comprising the Early Church epoch.¹⁰ The early believers were not very evangelistic, were not successful in spreading their apologetics, participated in little open-air preaching, and little open advertising of the faith.¹¹ Though MacMullen is correct that there was much growth post-A.D.313, I am not ready to dismiss the missionary work of the Church for two hundred years except for the isolated and sporadic situations.

Reidar Hvalvik, agreeing that the early Church did grow, also did not see a widespread passion for evangelism. According to Hvalvik, "There is very little evidence for the assertion that every Christian in the early church saw it as a duty to take active part in evangelism. And what we would think of as the main motivation for missionary work, the Great Commission, was thought to have been fulfilled."¹²

Adolph Harnack, however, offered a different perspective noting that

The literary sources available for the history of primitive Christian missions are fragmentary. But how extensive they are, compared to the extant sources at our disposal for investigating the history of any other religion within the Roman Empire! They not only render it feasible for us to attempt a sketch of the mission and expansion of

Christianity which shall be coherent and complete in all its essential features, but also permit us to understand the reasons why this religion triumphed in the Roman empire, and how the triumph was achieved.¹³

Other scholars have commented on a strong militant zeal in the lives of the early believers.¹⁴ Another view comes from Kenneth Scott Latoruette, who would also clearly disagree with MacMullen and Hvalvik:

One of the factors to which is attributed the triumph of Christianity is the endorsement of Constantine. But, as we have suggested, the faith was already so strong by the time when Constantine espoused it that it would probably have won without him. Indeed, one of the motives sometimes ascribed to his support is his supposed desire to enlist the cooperation of what had become the strongest element in the Empire, the Christian Community.¹⁵

Even the writers of the Early Church offered their commentary on the size of the believers. For example, Tertullian in his *Apology* noted the large size of the number of believers during his days: "We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods."¹⁶

Though the arguments of MacMullen and Hvalvik have much to contribute to scholarship, I am more inclined to believe in the conclusions drawn by Harnack and Latoruette. The faith did spread and the Church did grow. But the question that remains unanswered is "How?" The rest of this article will list the various means.

Church Growth Through Martyrdom

The martyrdom of Steven (Acts 7:54-60) obviously had a major impact on the Church. Though we do not know of anyone coming to faith as a direct result of his testimony at death, we can speculate as to the impact his witness had on Saul (Acts 8:1). Indirectly, however, Luke recorded that the persecution and subsequent scattering of believers (Acts 8:4) resulted in the gospel being taken to many new places (Acts 8:5; 11:19). Throughout the book of Acts, the attitudes of the believers under persecution seemed to reflect the attitudes found in the Church's early petition: "Now Lord, consider their threats and enable your slaves to

“speak your word with great boldness” (Acts 4:29).

Though Early Church persecution is believed to have been sporadic and parochial, history does record the death of many believers and the impact of their testimonies on the unbelievers. Latourette commented:

The constancy of the martyrs under torture impressed many non-Christians. As we have seen, by no means all Christians stood up under trial. Many wilted. Yet enough remained firm to give convincing evidence of a power which nerved children, old men, and weak women as well as stalwart youths to hold to their faith under grueling and prolonged torment and to do so without bitterness towards their enemies. One of the apologists was obviously speaking truth when he declared that when reviled, the Christians blessed.¹⁷

For example, while offering his apology to Diognetus, the anonymous author of the *Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* (A.D. 130) wrote of the growth of the Church coming through the means of persecution.

Do you not see them exposed to wild beasts, that they may be persuaded to deny the Lord, and yet not overcome? Do you not see that the more of them are punished, the greater becomes the number of the rest? This does not seem to be the work of man: this is the power of God; these are the devices of His manifestation.¹⁸

Eusebius, referencing Clement’s record of the martyrdom of the apostle James, described the resulting conversion of an unnamed guard.

He said that the man who led James to the judgment seat, moved by the way James bore his testimony to the faith, confessed himself Christian. Both therefore, said he, were led away to die. On their way, he entreated James to be forgiven of him, and James considering a little, replied, ‘Peace be to thee,’ and kissed him. Then both were beheaded at the same time.¹⁹

Eusebius also mentioned the martyrdom of Paulus and his witness in the face of death.

About the time of his execution, he requested the executioner, who was on the point of cutting off his head, to allow him a short space of time. When this was granted, with a loud and clear voice, he first interceded with God

in his prayers, imploring pardon for his fellow Christians and earnestly entreating that peace and liberty might be soon granted them. Then he prayed for the conversion of the Jews to God through Christ. He proceeded, in order, imploring the same things for the Samaritans and those Gentiles who were in error and ignorance of God, that they might come to his knowledge and be led to adopt the true religion, not omitting or neglecting to include the mixed multitude that stood around. After all these, oh, the great and inexpressible forbearance! [H]e prayed for the judge who condemned him to death, for the imperial rulers themselves, and for him who was about to sever his head from his body, in the hearing of him and all present, supplicating the supreme God not to impute to them their sin against him."²⁰

Eusebius also wrote of the martyr Agapius who was led into an arena to be thrown to wild beasts. Reflecting on this situation, Eusebius noted that apparently this believer was supposed to be executed on another occasion, but for some reason his martyrdom was delayed. Noting that the Emperor was present, Eusebius speculated, "He seemed to have been purposely reserved for that time and that also the declaration of our Savior might be fulfilled which he declared to his disciples in his divine foreknowledge that they would be led before kings for the sake of confessing him."²¹ Describing the story, he wrote:

But this wrestler of piety was first summoned by the tyrant, then demanded to renounce his purpose with the promise of liberty. With a loud voice, he declared that he would cheerfully and with pleasure sustain whatever he might inflict on him, not indeed, for any wickedness but for his veneration of the God of the universe. Saying this, he combined actions with his words and rushing against a bear let loose upon him, he most readily offered himself to be devoured by the beast, after which he was taken up yet breathing and carried to prison. Surviving but one day, he had stones bound to his feet and was plunged into the midst of the sea. Such then was the martyrdom of Agapius.²²

Church Growth Through Personal Evangelism

One of the best New Testament examples of personal evangelism is in the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian

(Acts 8:4-39). The Spirit led Philip to the chariot at precisely the moment when the eunuch was in need of someone to explain the conundrum of Isaiah 53:7-8. Later, Paul and Silas would find themselves in the middle of the night preaching Jesus to the Philippian jailer, resulting in the baptism of his entire household (Acts 16:25-34).

One of the most famous Church critics was Celsus. Though the original writing has been lost, Origen did include portions of Celsus' attacks in his own writings. Noting Celsus' disgust with the Christians, Origen recorded the role of the personal witness of the believers in the spread of the gospel.

"He asserts, 'We see, indeed, in private houses workers in wool and leather, and fullers, and persons of the most instructed and rustic character, not venturing to utter a word in the presence of their elders and wiser masters; but when they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements, to the effect that they ought not to give heed to their father and to their teachers, but should obey them; that the former are foolish and stupid, and neither know nor can perform anything that is really good, being preoccupied with empty trifles; that *they* alone know how men ought to live, and that, if the children obey them, they will both be happy themselves, and will make their home happy also. And while thus speaking, if they see one of the instructors of youth approaching, or one of the more intelligent class, or even the father himself, the more timid among them become afraid, while the more forward incite the children to throw off the yoke, whispering that in the presence of father and teachers they neither will nor can explain to them any good thing, seeing they turn away with aversion from the silliness and stupidity of such persons as being altogether corrupt, and far advanced in wickedness, and such as would inflict punishment upon them; but that if they wish (to avail themselves of their aid,) they must leave their father and their instructors, and go with the women and their playfellows to the women's apartments, or to the leather shop, or to the fuller's shop, that they may attain to perfection;—and by words like these they gain them over'."²³

Origen himself was known for his own personal evangelism. Commenting on the witness of Origen, Eusebius wrote of the profound testimony he gave through his lifestyle.

But the persecution against him daily blazed forth with such virulence that the whole city of Alexandria could no longer contain him. He removed from house to house, driven about in every direction, on account of the great number of those who had been brought over by him to the true faith, since also his daily actions afforded admirable specimens of a conduct resulting from a sound philosophy. "As his doctrine," said they, "so was his life; and as his life, so also was his doctrine." Wherefore, also, with the divine assistance, he induced numbers to imitate him.²⁴

Continuing on, Eusebius noted:

But in presenting such specimens of his ascetic life to the beholders, he naturally induced many of his visitors to pursue the same course; so now many, both of the unbelieving heathen, some of the learned, and even philosophers of no mean account, were prevailed upon to adopt his doctrine. Some of these, also, having been deeply imbued by him with the sound faith in Christ deeply implanted in the soul, were also eminent in the midst of the persecution then prevailing, so that some were taken and finished their course by martyrdom.²⁵

The Octavius of Minucius Felix is an argument between the unbelieving Cæcilius and the believing Octavius. *Minucius Felix*, the supposed author, serves as an arbitrator between the two. By the end of his writing, Cæcilius becomes a believer.

While, therefore, I was silently turning over these things in my own mind, Cæcilius broke forth: "I congratulate as well my Octavius as myself, as much as possible on that tranquility in which we live, and I do not wait for the decision. Even thus we have conquered: not unjustly do I assume to myself the victory. For even as he is my conqueror, so I am triumphant over error. Therefore, in what belongs to the substance of the question, I both confess concerning providence, and I yield to God; and I agree concerning the sincerity of the way of life which is now mine."²⁶

Concluding his work, he wrote: "After these things we departed, glad and cheerful: Cæcilius, to rejoice that he had believed; Octavius, that he had succeeded; and I, that the one had believed, and the other had conquered."²⁷

Church Growth through Open Air Preaching

Following the violent sound and the gathering of the multitude, Peter had the opportunity to preach the gospel beginning with Joel 2:28-32. Later, in Solomon's Colonnade, he had another opportunity to speak to a large crowd about the Messiah (Acts 3:11-26). In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas preached to a crowd in a public area (Acts 14:14-18). Also, near a place of prayer in Philippi, Paul and his team had the opportunity to proclaim the message to a group of women (Acts 16:13-15).

Through the writings of Origen, Celsus may have revealed a common public preaching approach of the early believers while expressing his opposition to the gospel. He accused the believers of being like the charlatans who "in the market-places perform the most disgraceful tricks, and who gather crowds around them, would never approach an assembly of wise men, nor dare to exhibit their arts among them; but whenever they see young men, and a mob of slaves, and a gathering of unintelligent persons, thither they thrust themselves in, and show themselves off."²⁸

In his introductory comments to the *Recognitions of Clement*, Thomas Smith wrote, "The *Recognitions of Clement* is a kind of philosophical and theological romance. The writer of the work seems to have had no intention of presenting his statements as facts; but, choosing the disciples of Christ and their followers as his principal characters, he has put into their mouths the most important of his beliefs, and woven the whole together by a thread of fictitious narrative."²⁹ Despite the possible fictitious nature of the narrative, the writer may have left behind a clue to the fact that open air preaching was one of the early methods used by the Church to spread the gospel.

It is here the writer tells the story of a certain Barnabas, a believer, who arrived in Rome to share the gospel. The author noted, "When I heard these things [that he had come to preach], I began, with the rest of the multitude, to follow him, and to hear what he had to say." Continuing on, he wrote, "For he did not confirm his assertions by the force of arguments, but produced, from the people who stood round about him, many witnesses of the sayings and marvels which he related."³⁰

As Barnabas began to speak, hecklers began their opposition and the educated and more philosophically minded attacked with "grappling-hooks of syllogisms." Undaunted, he responded to the crowd:

We have it in charge to declare to you the words and the wondrous works of Him who hath sent us, and to con-

firm the truth of what we speak, not by artfully devised arguments, but by witnesses produced from amongst yourselves. For I recognize many standing in the midst of you whom I remember to have heard along with us the things which we have heard, and to have seen what we have seen. But be it in your option to receive or to spurn the tidings which we bring to you. For we cannot keep back what we know to be for your advantage, because, if we be silent, woe is to us; but to you, if you receive not what we speak, destruction.³¹

Church Growth through Itinerants

Though there were seasons when the Apostle Paul would practice a sedentary ministry (e.g., Acts 14:27-28), most of the time he was actively involved in itinerant work. Throughout Acts, he is noted to have been on the move traveling from major city to major city. Following the persecution in Jerusalem, Philip seemed to have manifested an itinerant ministry until he arrived in Caesarea (Acts 8:40; 21:8).

Eusebius commented on the locations where the apostles traveled throughout the world spreading the gospel.

Such, then, was the state of the Jews at this time. But the holy apostles and disciples of our Savior, were scattered over the whole world: Thomas, according to tradition, received Parthia as his allotted region, Andrew received Scythia, and John, Asia, where, after continuing for some time, he died at Ephesus. Peter appears to have preached through Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews who were scattered abroad; he finally came to Rome and was crucified with his head downward, having requested of himself to suffer in this way. Why should we speak of Paul, spreading the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum and finally suffering martyrdom at Rome under Nero? This account was given by Origen in the third book of his exposition of Genesis.³²

One such example of a philosopher-turned-evangelist was Pantænus. According to Eusebius,

The tradition is that this philosopher was then in great eminence, as he had been first disciplined in the philosophical principles of those called stoics. But he is said to have displayed such ardor and so zealous a disposition respecting the divine word, that he was constituted

a herald of the gospel of Christ to the nations of the East and advanced even as far as India. There were even there many evangelists of the word, who were ardently striving to employ their inspired zeal after the apostolic example to increase and build up the divine word.³³

In *Against Celsus*, Origen revealed the itinerate nature of many believers of his day. He articulated, "Christians do not neglect, as far as in them lies, to take measures to disseminate their doctrine throughout the whole world. Some of them, accordingly, have made it their business to itinerate not only through cities, but even villages and country houses, that they might make converts to God."³⁴

Coxe in his introductory note to Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* commented on the evangelistic thrust behind some of the leaders of the Early Church. For example, "We reach the banks of the Rhone, where for nearly a century Christian missions have flourished. Between Marseilles and Smyrna there seems to have been a brisk trade, and Polycarp had sent Pothinus into Celtic Gaul at an early date as its evangelist."³⁵ Later, specifically referring to Irenaeus, he wrote: "The Episcopate of Irenæus was distinguished by labors, 'in season and out of season,' for the evangelization of Southern Gaul; and he seems to have sent missionaries into other regions of what we now call France."³⁶

The early work known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, assumed itinerant ministries by describing the proper manner in which a believer should provide hospitality to those traveling through their city. According to the author, "Let every apostle that cometh to you be received as the Lord. But he shall not remain *except* one day; but if there be need, also the next; but if he remain three days, he is a false prophet. And when the apostle goeth away, let him take nothing but bread until he lodgeth; but if he ask money, he is a false prophet."³⁷

Church Growth through Signs and Wonders

MacMullen referred to the role of signs and wonders in the growth of the Apostolic and Early Church as "the chief instrument of conversion."³⁸ The New Testament is replete with accounts of scores of people coming to faith through the means of signs and wonders opening doors for the preaching of the gospel. The healing of the lame man by Peter and John provided a natural opportunity to publicly preach the gospel (Acts 3). Opportunities to preach the message were given to Philip following signs and wonders performed in Samaria (Acts 8:6-7). In Ephesus, the Lord worked through Paul to do extraordinary

miracles, resulting in a large number of people becoming believers (Acts 19:11-20).

Origen argued that the same Holy Spirit that empowered Jesus to accomplish the miraculous was the same Spirit that worked in some believers in his day to accomplish likewise.

They expel evil spirits, and perform many cures, and foresee certain events, according to the will of the Logos. And although Celsus, or the Jew whom he has introduced, may treat with mockery what I am going to say, I shall say it nevertheless,—that many have been converted to Christianity as if against their will, some sort of spirit having suddenly transformed their minds from a hatred of the doctrine to a readiness to die in its defense, and having appeared to them either in a waking vision or a dream of the night.³⁹

Irenaeus arguing that Jesus' followers also received grace to perform signs and wonders wrote, "For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church."⁴⁰

Church Growth through Public Discussion/Debate

In Athens (Acts 17:16-34), Paul was brought before the more philosophically minded population at Mars Hill. Despite the fact that he was accused of being a "seed-picker," a few listeners did believe (Acts 17:34). In Corinth, Paul found himself reasoning with and persuading the synagogue attendees (Acts 18:4). Again, in Ephesus, Paul spent much time in the synagogue, and later in the Hall of Tyrannus, engaging in persuasive discussions (Acts 19:8-10).

In the *Recognitions*, the author described a time when after arriving in Caesarea Stratonis he met Peter, "a most approved disciple of Him who appeared in Judaea."⁴¹ This Peter entered into an intentionally planned public discourse with a certain Simon Magus about the truth of the gospel. Before going to the location for the debate, Peter requested prayer from the believers, revealing the evangelistic drive behind the debate: "Brethren, let us pray that God, for His unspeakable mercy through His Christ, would help me going out on behalf of the salvation of men who have been created by Him.' Having said this, and having prayed, he went forth to the court of the house, in which a great multitude of people were assembled."⁴²

Later, Peter arrived in Tripolis and through his connections with a believer named Maro was able to locate a place in his

home to address another crowd of people:

“But enough has been said of these things; for time presses, and the religious devotion of the people invites us to address them.” And when he had thus spoken, he asked where there was a suitable place for discussion. And Maro said: “I have a very spacious hall which can hold more than five hundred men, and there is also a garden within the house; or if it please you to be in some public place, all would prefer it, for there is nobody who does not desire at least to see your face.” The Peter said: “Show me the hall, or the garden.” And when he had seen the hall, he went in to see the garden also; and suddenly the whole multitude, as if someone had called them, rushed into the house and thence broke through into the garden, where Peter was already standing, selecting a fit place for discussion.⁴³

Church Growth through Church Planting

Much of Paul’s work consisted of evangelism that resulted in churches. After his first missionary journey, Luke recorded the following summary:

After they had evangelized that town and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch, strengthening the hearts of the disciples by encouraging them to continue in the faith, and by telling them, “It is necessary to pass through many troubles on our way into the kingdom of God.” When they had appointed elders in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:21-23, HCSB).

Hinson commented that “individual missionary endeavor most of the time either took place in relation to churches or resulted in the planting of churches which would continue the task of witnessing to others and incorporate them into their membership.”⁴⁴ Throughout the New Testament the pattern for church planting usually resulted from the church planters entering a city, evangelizing and congregationalizing the new believers, and appointing elders over the new congregation.

Socrates, while describing how the interior nations of India were Christianized in the days of Constantine offered a short discourse regarding the destinations of some of the Apostles: “When the apostles went forth by lot among the nations, Thomas received the apostleship of the Parthians; Matthew was allotted

Ethiopia; and Bartholomew the part of India contiguous to that country; but the interior India, in which many barbarous nations using different languages lived, was not enlightened by Christian doctrine before the times of Constantine."⁴⁵

Eusebius writing on the evangelism and church planting work following the first apostles noted:

Of those who flourished in these times, Quadratus is said to have been distinguished for his prophetic gifts. There were many others also noted in these times who held the first rank in the apostolic succession. These, as the holy disciples of such men, built up the churches where foundations had been previously laid in every place by the apostles. They augmented the means of promulgating the gospel more and more and spread the seeds of salvation and of the heavenly kingdom throughout the world far and wide. Most of the disciples at that time, animated with a more ardent love of the divine word, had first fulfilled the Savior's precept by distributing their substance to the needy. Afterwards leaving their country, they performed the office of evangelists to those who had not yet heard the faith, while with a noble ambition to proclaim Christ, they also delivered to them the books of the holy gospels.

After laying the foundation of the faith in foreign parts as the particular object of their mission, appointing others as shepherds of the flocks, and committing to these the care of those who had been recently introduced, they went again to other regions and nations with the grace and cooperating of God. The Holy Spirit also wrought many wonders as yet through them, so that as soon as the gospel was heard, men voluntarily in crowds, eagerly embraced the true faith with their whole minds. As it is impossible for us to give the numbers of the individuals who became pastors or evangelists during the first immediate succession from the apostles in the churches throughout the world, we have only recorded those by name in our history, of whom we have received the traditional accounts it was delivered in the various comments on the apostolic doctrine still extant.⁴⁶

Also, according to Eusebius, it was Mark who traveled to Egypt and first "proclaimed the gospel there which he had written and first established churches at the city of Alexandria."⁴⁷ Reflecting on the growth of the Church, the early historian also

noted “inspired evangelists and apostles had gone throughout all the earth and their words to the ends of the world. Throughout every city and village, like a replenished barn floor, churches were rapidly found abounding and filled with members from every people.”⁴⁸

In the *Recognitions*, Simon Magus departs from the presence of Peter to travel to other locations to mislead others with his false teachings. In response, Peter vows to follow after Simon, proclaiming the truth. Deciding it is best to remain in Caesarea to strengthen the Church, Peter informs the believers there that “In order, therefore, that you may be more and more confirmed in the truth, and the nations who are called to salvation may in no way be prevented by the wickedness of Simon, I have thought good to ordain Zacchæus as pastor over you, and to remain with you myself for three months; and so to go to the Gentiles, lest through our delaying longer, and the crimes of Simon stalking in every direction, they should become incurable.”⁴⁹

Church Growth through Writings

Though much of the New Testament was written to the newly planted churches, clearly John writes with an evangelistic component: “So that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God” (John 20:31, HCSB). Despite the fact that there is much in the Synoptics that is didactical (e.g., Luke 1:4), it must be remembered that they also contained the good news of salvation (e.g., Mark 1:1). In essence, this genre of literature served the Church as some of Her first tracts.

Origen’s evangelistic nature is evident in his writings. In his work against Celsus’ ideologies, he noted: “We, however, keeping both these things in view, at first invite all men to be healed, and exhort those who are sinners to come to the consideration of the doctrines which teach men not to sin, and those who are devoid of understanding to those which beget wisdom, and those who are children to rise in their thoughts to manhood, and those who are simply unfortunate to good fortune, or – which is the more appropriate term to use—to blessedness.”⁵⁰

In the introductory note to *The Exhortation* by Clement of Alexandria, the author commented on the evangelistic nature of this work: “*The Exhortation*, the object of which is to win pagans to the Christian faith, contains a complete and withering exposure of the abominable licentiousness, the gross imposture and sordidness of paganism. With clearness and cogency of argument, great earnestness and eloquence, Clement sets forth in contrast the truth as taught in the inspired Scriptures, the true God, and especially the personal Christ, the living Word of God,

the Savior of men."⁵¹

Clement here announces the call for repentance: "Then, those who have put faith in necromancers, receive from them amulets and charms, to ward off evil forsooth; and will you not allow the heavenly Word, the Savior, to be bound on to you as an amulet, and, by trusting in God's own charm, be delivered from passions which are the diseases of the mind, and rescued from sin?—for sin is eternal death."⁵² Continuing on he noted:

But it has been God's fixed and constant purpose to save the flock of men: for this end the good God sent the good Shepherd. And the Word, having unfolded the truth, showed to men the height of salvation, that either repenting they might be saved, or refusing to obey, they might be judged. This is the proclamation of righteousness: to those that obey, glad tidings; to those that disobey, judgment."⁵³

It was said of Justin Martyr that, "he acted as an evangelist, taking every opportunity to proclaim the gospel as the only safe and certain philosophy, the only way to salvation."⁵⁴ At the conclusion of Justin's second apology he wrote, "And I despised the wicked and deceitful doctrine of Simon of my own nation. And if you give this book your authority, we will expose him before all, that, if possible, they may be converted. For this end alone did we compose this treatise."⁵⁵

The writer of *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus* was obviously writing to share with one Diognetus about the Christian faith. Throughout this brief epistle, he shared with his reader the truth of the gospel: "As a king sends his son, who is also a king, so sent He Him; as God He sent Him; as to men He sent Him; as a Savior He sent Him, and as seeking to persuade, not to compel us; for violence has no place in the character of God. As calling us He sent Him, not as vengefully pursuing us; as loving us He sent Him, not as judging us."⁵⁶ Continuing on, it is easy to see the passion of this writer for the communication of the gospel.

He Himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God?⁵⁷

Church Growth through the use of Houses and Oikos Units

Though others have discussed the family of the first century,⁵⁸ it was only until recently that Roger W. Gehring examined in extensive detail the importance of household structures in the mission of the Apostolic Church. Gehring wrote:

By their very existence, house churches were of great importance for the expansion of the early Christian movement. . . . With them a phenomenon entered the Greco-Roman world that demanded the attention of their environment. Their unaffected way for relating, their brotherly love, their sense of togetherness as members of the body of Christ, from which a mutual concern for one another grew (or was supposed to grow; cf. 1 Cor 11-14)—all of this stimulated the interest of their fellow citizens and presumably led them to ask the members of these house churches why they were the way they were.⁵⁹

Andrew brought his brother Peter to the Lord and Philip brought his brother Nathaniel to the Lord (John 1:40-42, 45). In Caesarea, Cornelius and his close relatives and friends came to faith (Acts 10:24, 47-48) In Philippi, both Lydia and her household (Acts 16:15) and the jailer and his household (Acts 16:34) became believers. Paul sends greetings to the church meeting in the home of Priscilla and Aquilia (Romans 16:5), the believers who are those of the household of Narcissus (Romans 16:11), Rufus and his mother (Romans 16:13), and those of the household of Aristobulus.

Hvalvik discussed the importance of the role of the family in the spread of the gospel. He observed, "The early Christians were part of families and other social networks. At the very outset it is reasonable to think that this became a most important factor in the spreading of the Christian faith, may be *the* most important factor."⁶⁰ For example, in the brief, anonymous writing, *The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs*, the author clearly revealed the importance of the family in the spread of the gospel.

And Pæon stood up and said, "I too am a Christian." Rusticus the perfect said, "Who taught you?" Pæon said, "From our parents we received this good confession." Euelpistus said, "I willingly heard the words of Justin. But from my parents also I learned to be a Christian."⁶¹

Conclusion

This article has attempted to address the various means by which the gospel spread during the first three hundred years of the Church. Though the Early Church writings are limited in number, nevertheless, they do provide glimpses of the means by which the good news traveled from the small group of believers in Jerusalem to becoming the official religion of the Empire. The story of the growth of the Church during these early centuries is fascinating, encouraging, and challenging to the Church today.

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NOTES

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2. *The Epistles of Cyprian* (81.1); *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol 5, 408.

3. A. Cleveland Coxe, "The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenæus," in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1, American Ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), vii.

4. Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries Volumes 1-2*, James Moffatt, translator (New York, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1904-05) and Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).

5. For socio-historical studies I direct the reader to the following: Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983); Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, vol 1 trans., James Moffatt (New York, NY: Arno Press, Inc., 1904-05), 1-39.; Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 29-75.

6. See Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* as an example of one author who staunchly believes the Early Church was extremely evangelistic. On the other hand, the reader should consult Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire: A.D. 100-400* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984) and Reidar Hvalvik, "In Word and Deed: The Expansion of the Church in the pre-Constantinian Era," in Jostein Ádna and Hans Kvalbein, eds., *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (Tübingen 2000): 265-87, for an opposite perspective.

7. Green, 23.

8. McMullen noted, "Nothing counts for more than the year 312, which brought Constantine's conversion, or 313, with the Edict of Milan. The toleration of the latter simply made manifest the meaning of the former date" (MacMullen, 102).
9. MacMullen, 103.
10. It should be noted that I am defining the Apostolic Church years roughly ending in A.D. 100 and the Early Church years approximately between A.D. 100-300.
11. MacMullen, 104-11.
12. Hvalvik, 279.
13. Harnack, vol. 1, xii.
14. E. Glenn Hinson, *The Evangelization of the Roman Empire: Identity and Adaptability* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1981), 31.
15. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500*, 1 rev. ed., (Peabody, MA : Prince Press, 1975), 105.
16. Tertullian, *Apology*, 37, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Eds. *Ante-Nicene Fathers 3* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 45. In his writing entitled, *To Scapula*, Tertullian specifically mentioned by name the wife of one authority figure, noting to what social heights the gospel had spread. "Claudius Lucius Herminianus in Capadocia, enraged that his wife had become a Christian, had treated the Christians with great cruelty: well, left alone in his palace, suffering under a contagious malady, he boiled out in living worms, and was heard exclaiming, 'Let nobody know of it, lest the Christians rejoice, and Christian wives take encouragement'" (*To Scapula*, 3, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol 3, 106).
17. Latourette, 106-07.
18. *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, 7, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers 1* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 27-28.
19. *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History 2.9.2-3; Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, C.F. Cruse, trans., new updated ed., (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 44.
20. *Eusebius, The Book of Martyrs 8; Cruse*, 318.
21. *Eusebius, The Book of Martyrs 6; Cruse*, 314.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Origen *Against Celsus*, 3.55, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers 4* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 486.
24. *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 6.3.6; Cruse, 194.
25. *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 6.3.13; Cruse, 195.
26. *The Octavius of Minucius Felix*, 40, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers 4* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 197.
27. *Ibid.*, 41; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 198.

28. *Origen Against Celsus*, 3.50; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 484.
29. Thomas Smith, "Introductory Notice to the Recognitions of Clement," in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 73. The *Recognitions* are part of the *Pseudo-Clementine Literature*.
30. *Recognitions of Clement*, 1.7, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 79.
31. *Recognitions of Clement*, 1.8; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 79.
32. *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1; Cruse, 67.
33. *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History* 5.10; Cruse, 166.
34. *Origen Against Celsus*, 3.9; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 468.
35. Coxe, "Introductory Note to Irenæus," 309.
36. *Ibid.*, 310.
37. *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, 11, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 380.
38. MacMullen, 27.
39. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.46; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 415.
40. *Irenæus Against Heresies*, 2.32.4, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 409.
41. *Recognitions of Clement*, 1.12; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 80.
42. *Recognitions of Clement*, 2.19; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 102.
43. *Recognitions of Clement*, 4.6; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 136.
44. Hinson, 40.
45. Socrates Scholasticus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 1.19, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2004). 23.
46. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.37; Cruse, 102.
47. *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 2.16; Cruse, 50.
48. *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 2.3.1-2; Cruse, 39.
49. *Recognitions of Clement*, 3.65; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 131.
50. *Origen Against Celsus* 59; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 487-88.
51. A. Cleveland Coxe, "Introductory Note to Clement of Alexandria," in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 167.
52. Clement, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, 11 in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 204.
53. *Ibid.*
54. A. Cleveland Coxe, "Introductory Note to the First Apology of Justin Martyr," in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 160.
55. *The Second Apology of Justin*, 15 in Alexander Roberts and James

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56. *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, 7; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 27.

57. *The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus*, 9; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 28.

58. See Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

59. Roger W. Ghering, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 189.

60. Hvalvik, 282.

61. *The Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs*, 3 in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers 1* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 306.