



Lessons For Today's Church fro the Life of the Early Church

J.Warner Wallace “Cold Case Christianity”

The first Christians were revolutionaries. The group they formed was, in many ways, very different from what we know as the Church today. According to the Book of Acts, they met in their homes and devoted themselves to God's Word. As a result, these early Christians brought about the most amazing and powerful transformation the world has ever known. Think about it for a minute. Christians emerged in the midst a tremendously diverse Roman melting pot of social and religious ideas, and through purely peaceful means completely changed the Empire and united it under the banner of Christianity. And they did it without a single mega-church, television program or website. They simply opened their homes, spoke the truth fearlessly and trusted God for the results. Long before Christianity became a dominant political power, it was a divine movement of God. Long before Christianity found a comfortable home in church buildings, it was an active body of passionate believers:

1. Christians Were Bound and United By A Common Truth

Early observers of the movement recognized the first believers were committed to an important objective truth claim: Jesus Christ is God Himself and the only way to enter into a personal relationship with the Creator of the Universe. This common truth and relationship to Christ became the unifying force behind the movement of God. Look at what Tertullian (a church scholar who lived in North Africa c. 160-225AD) had to say as he described the young Christian believers:

“We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering up prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. This strong exertion God delights in. We pray, too, for the emperors, for their ministers and for all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for the prevalence of peace, for the delay of the final consummation.”

2. Christians Were Characterized by Uncommon Joy

In the midst of terrible persecution and hardship, these early believers were able to stay focused on God instead of their own situation. As a result, regardless of their personal circumstances, they were able to live with joy. Read these words from unknown author of the Epistle to Diognetes (written c. 130AD):

“They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened

into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.”

Aristides presented a letter to the Emperor Hadrian (c. 117-138AD) and described the uncommon joy of early believers:

“Every morning and all hours on account of the goodness of God toward them, they render praise and laud Him over their food and their drink; they render Him thanks. And if any righteous person of their number passes away from this world, they rejoice and give thanks to God and they follow his body as though he were moving from one place to another. And when a child is born to them, they praise God, and if again it chances to die in its infancy, they praise God mightily, as for one who has passed through the world without sins.”

3. Christians Were a Fearless and Animated People, Not a Passive Church

Early Christians did not go to church, they were the church; they did not attend church services, they impacted their culture as the people of God. They assembled not as the end goal, but as a way to equip themselves to be the people God intended them to be and do the work God intended them to do. Listen again to Tertullian:

“We assemble to read our sacred writings . . . and with the sacred words we nourish our faith, we animate our hope, we make our confidence more steadfast; and no less by inculcations of God’s precepts we confirm good habits...”

4. Christians Were Known By Their Love

Because they had surrendered so completely to God’s call on their lives, they began to live as the children of God. The world took notice. Again from Tertullian:

“But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. ‘See’, they say, ‘how they love one another’, for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred. ‘See’, they say about us, ‘how they are ready even to die for one another’, for they themselves would sooner kill.” And again from the Apology of Aristides

“They abstain from all impurity in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world. As for their servants or handmaids or children, they persuade them to become Christians by the love they have for them; and when they become so, they call them without distinction, brothers. They do not worship strange gods; and they walk in all humility and kindness, and falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another. When they see the stranger they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as over a true brother; for they do not call those who are after the flesh, but those who are in the Spirit and in God.”

5. Christians Gave Sacrificially to the Needy

These early believers understood why God had given them the limited wealth they had. They did not have the burden of having to support programs or pay for a church building. Meeting in homes, and led by regular men of character, these first believers were able to pour all of their financial gifts into the care of the needy. In fact, over and over again in scripture, this is the only thing offerings were used for. Listen to Tertullian:

“Though we have our treasure-chest, it is not made up of purchase-money, as of a religion that has its price. On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are . . . not spent on

feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines or banished to the islands or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession."

And from the Apology of Aristides:

"And there is among them a man that is poor and needy and if they have not an abundance of necessities, they fast two or three days, that they may supply the needy with the necessary food."

6. Laymen of Character Led the Movement

The New Testament repeatedly describes small groups of believers lead by laypeople called elders. These elders were not paid staff, but simply men of character who rose to leadership based on their passion and gifting. Look at what Tertullian observed:

"The tried men of our elders preside over us, obtaining that honour not by purchase but by established character. There is no buying and selling of any sort in the things of God."

7. Christians Were God's Holy Ambassadors in a Dying World

The world also quickly recognized there was something very different about these Christians. They represented something noble and pure, and were influential in their communities. Read these words from the Epistle to Diognetes (c. 130AD) as this ancient letter describes how powerfully Christians reflected God's nature in the world:

"For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life..." "...They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives." "...To sum up all in one word—what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world. The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible. The flesh hates the soul, and wars against it, though itself suffering no injury, because it is prevented from enjoying pleasures; the world also hates the Christians, though in nowise injured, because they abjure pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and [loves also] the members; Christians likewise love those that hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world. The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle; and Christians dwell as sojourners in corruptible [bodies], looking for an incorruptible dwelling in the

heavens. The soul, when but ill-provided with food and drink, becomes better; in like manner, the Christians, though subjected day by day to punishment, increase the more in number. God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it were unlawful for them to forsake.”

Early Christians stood apart from the world because they had been transformed by the power of God and had surrendered themselves to their Lord in both word and deed. From the Apology of Aristides:

“They observe scrupulously the commandment of their Messiah; they live honestly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them.

Clearly the early believers were living their faith, and not merely going to church. In fact, there was no institutional church to go to, even if they wanted to. Yet the movement was impossible to stop, and it eventually encompassed the known world. Where did these early believers come up with this notion of the Christian life that is not dependent on buildings, paid staff, or programs? They got the model from their predecessors as described in the scriptures:

Acts 2:42-47

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The first community of saints reflected the power and design of God in their lives as a family of believers. This early history of the church simply reflected the teaching of the Bible as it recorded the nature and essence of the very first community of saints in this passage in the Book of Acts. The early Christians didn’t attend church, they were the Church; an active, energized body of believers equipped to change the world. Today’s Church can learn something from the Early Church.

“All the People”

If you look in the book of Acts, scan around for usage of this phrase and where it is used in Acts 2-4. What is Luke doing with this phrase? Is he highlighting something?