

Sermon follow

11/2/08 – All Saints Sunday

The Spectacular Rise and Growth of the Early Church

Rich Lusk

A number of scholars have sought to address the kinds of issues I was raising in the sermon, namely, [1] how did the early church grow so rapidly against such odds?; and [2] what lessons can the contemporary Western church glean from the achievement of the early Christians?

This is by no means an extensive bibliography, nor is it an endorsement of all these authors since many of them come from an anabaptist, anti-Christendom point of view which I do not share. But it should still be a helpful list for those wanting to do further study.

The Rise of Christianity by Rodney Stark – Stark has produced the key work of scholarship on the growth of the early church. This is a monumental book.

The First Urban Christians by Wayne Meeks – Meeks' work parallels Stark's in certain respects. This is his most useful book.

Under the Influence by Alvin Schmidt – An excellent study of the impact of the gospel on culture. There are other books that do the same kind of thing, but this is by far the best one of the bunch. Highly recommended.

The Reduction of Christianity by Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart – Includes a study of the theology of the kingdom found on the church fathers.

Ancient Faith for the Church's Future edited by Mark Husbands and Jeffrey Greenman – See especially chapters 7-9 on hospitality, wealth, and suffering in the early church.

Transforming Mission by David Bosch – The most comprehensive historical-theological study of the missional church ever written.

Another City by Barry Harvey – While flawed in certain respects, this is a truly excellent study of missional ecclesiology, then and now. See Leithart's *Against Christianity* for a helpful corrective.

The work of Stanley Hauerwas and its offshoots – Hauerwas has been at the center of missional ecclesiology for many years now, and his work incorporates insights from the early church as well as applications to our present postmodern situation. See especially Hauerwas' collaborative efforts with William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* and *Where Resident Aliens Live*, as well as his *After Christendom*. A number of scholars have begun to interact, sometimes quite critically, with Hauerwas's work, e.g., *The Church as Polis* by Arne Rasmusson.

The work of Lesslie Newbigin and its offshoots – Newbigin has several works worth reading, but perhaps the best way to get an overview of his thought is through his biography by Geoffrey Wainwright. Newbigin's work has also spawned the "Gospel and Our Culture Network" which publishes scores of helpful books and articles.

The Spirit of Early Christian Thought by Robert Wilken – Wilken also has a number of helpful articles, but this book is an outstanding contribution to the whole discussion. Wilken shows that the church of our day could greatly benefit from a deeper knowledge of the church fathers.

Jesus and Empire by Richard Horsely – Horsely has a number of books that contribute to this discussion but this my favorite.

The Foundations of Social Order and *Atheism and the Early Church* by R. J. Rushdoony -- Helpful studies of how early Christians navigated the challenges of pagan culture and laid the groundwork for a Christian civilization.

A Peculiar People and *People of the Truth* by Rodney Clapp – Clapp has published a number of works that are helpful in assessing the cultural and political role of the church. His works are often vitiated by an unfair view of what medieval Christendom was all about, but he still has many penetrating insights.

The Kingdom and the Power and *Against Christianity* by Peter Leithart – These two books are outstanding. *Against Christianity* is especially helpful in appropriating the lessons of the early church for today. Leithart's work is very similar to that of Clapp and Harvey, but with a much healthier understanding of Christendom.

The Church as Counter-Culture edited by Michael Budde and Robert Brimlow – Several of the essays here are quite helpful.

Torture and Eucharist, Theopolitical Imagination, and Being Consumed by William Cavanaugh – Cavanaugh is one of the most brilliant writers in the church today and a number of his works bear upon these questions under discussion. I have to part ways with him at many points, but find him to be a very helpful read in thinking through questions of ecclesiology, mission, and mercy.

Who Gets to Narrate the World? by Robert Webber – Webber can be largely credited with helping evangelicals rediscover the riches of the ancient church a generation ago. His whole ancient/future project is commendable in many ways. This book – his final work before he passed away – is an excellent statement of his vision for the church. Chapters 2-4 draw heavily on the insights and practices of the early Christians.

Making Room by Christine Pohl – An excellent study of the virtues of the early church, as refracted in their practice of hospitality.

Many of these insights are laced through N. T. Wright's works. This quotation in particular may serve as nice summary and conclusion:

Christianity did not spread by magic. It is sometimes suggested that the world was, so to speak, ready for Christianity: Stoicism was too lofty and dry, popular paganism metaphysically incredible and morally bankrupt, mystery-religions dark and forbidding, Judaism law-bound and introverted, and Christianity burst on the scene as the great answer to the questions everyone was asking. There is a grain of truth in this picture, but it hardly does justice to historical reality. Christianity summoned proud pagans to face torture and death out of loyalty to a Jewish villager who had been executed by Rome. Christianity advocated a love which cut across racial boundaries. It sternly forbade sexual immorality, the exposure of children, and a great many other things which the pagan world took for granted. Choosing to become a Christian was not an easy or natural thing for the average pagan. A Jew who converted might well be regarded as a national traitor. Even slaves, who might be supposed to have less to lose than others, and hence to appreciate an elevation of status through conversion, might face a cost: as we saw, Pliny thought it normal to interrogate, with torture, slave-girls who happened to be part of the early Christian movement. We have no reason to suppose that interrogation under torture was any easier for a young woman in the second century than it is in the twentieth.

Why then did early Christianity spread? Because early Christians believed that what they had found to be true was true for the whole world. The impetus to mission sprang from the very heart of early Christian conviction. If we know anything about early Christian praxis, at a non- or sub-literary level, it is that the early Christians engaged in mission, both to Jews and Gentiles....This missionary activity was not an addendum to a faith that was basically 'about' something else (e.g. a new existential self-awareness). Christianity was never more *itself* than in the launching of the world mission.