

# Evangelism In The Early Church

## (Evangelism By The Lord & His Apostles)

By

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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 as a communion and as individuals. This church is considered as the module for all the periods of the Christian church, and this is 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:*

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The first century of Christianity started with the birth of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, His evangelism, and then His death, resurrection, and ascension to 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:*

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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 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 norms 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 their needs. Also, to share their feelings, and their lives if possible.

3- **His evangelism was saturated with parables, examples, words, and vivid images of the culture that every one of His audiences could identify with them 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 well learned. He gave a great example of not forgetting the poor and uneducated, a repeated mistake of 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 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 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 reach 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 initial requirement of evangelism. We can't 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 He did not stop to call 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 don't 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 humbleness.** This is a clear invitation for all Christian servants to follow His lead in how to respect, love, care of individuals. When we serve the multitudes we tend to be less appreciative of individuals' needs, which is a grave sin in evangelism.

e- **Refusal of materialistic richness, acceptance of honor from others, and of practice 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. [In the history we have seen the weakness crept into the church when the church or its servants seek materialistic richness or 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 rites 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 a mercy and not a sacrifice.' Orthodox evangelists need today 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 continuous obedience of His Father. He waited for His Father's declaration on His baptism before starting His service, although He could start His mission earlier. He obeyed until death on the cross, in self-denial and sacrifice.

## *The Church of The Apostles:*

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When the Jewish people refused the Gospel and it was clear that the message should go to the Gentiles, we noticed on the Pentecost Day **the Holy Spirit prepared the apostles for evangelism through giving them the ability to speak the languages of all the well-known nations of that period.** This shows us the basic fundamental requirement of evangelism, speaking the language.

## *The Characteristics of Evangelism in the Apostles' Period:*

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**1- Evangelism was the main objective of the church.** The Lord's left for the church 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 or social services or 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, concentrated on evangelism and prayers (Acts 6:1-6). Nowadays the Orthodox Church needs to focus again on the great commission left for her by the Lord, make it its top priority.

**2- Evangelism was not only the objective of the apostles but also of all the faithfuls.** Everybody in the church had evangelism as an important objective. Evangelism started with the person's baptism, when he feels the light of the grace. Then it 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 Cor 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 faithfuls' evangelism.

**3- Salvation was an objective of evangelism.** The objective was not just preaching or educating or telling the story of Jesus, but rather 'salvation.' Not anyone 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 ignore 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). So, faith was a requirement for baptism. No body can get baptized without faith, and nobody got 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. Then they stayed not long in each city until they ordained priests and deacons from the indigenious. The apostles delivered the faith and established churches, ordaining clergy from the people for the people. They delivered faith, prayers, and worship means, but not culture.

**7- Evangelists were filled of joy and the Holy Spirit.** The lives of the faithful were characterized by joy and peace, as a result of the deep 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 prayers.** Prayers were 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). Many nowadays belittle of the spontaneous prayers meetings and labeled them as Protestantism's acts. In evangelism, we need to restore the 'spontaneous prayer meetings.' We need also 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 talking 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:***

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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, and the power of the Gospel will change people's lives. This church is the one that we can say about it that it never delivered any aspect 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 the spirituality of the church exists in all these cultural aspects. But the Apostolic period correct us. Here is the greatest church 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 main interest was a church full of saved people who show the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, as a result of burying the old man and live in the newness 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 mastering their lives.

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

3- **A poor church**. It refused all materialistic richness, although it could collect much wealth if it 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.

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[http://www.suscopts.org/evangelism/frames/evangelism\\_in\\_early\\_church.html](http://www.suscopts.org/evangelism/frames/evangelism_in_early_church.html)