

A Brief History of Missions & Evangelism (1)

By Victor Beshir

During the course of history, Christian evangelism has never stopped. It started with its golden era during the apostolic period, which ended around the year 105 AD. In the subsequent four centuries of Christian history, evangelism spread out by five major means: [evangelism work\(verbal and non-verbal\)](#), the ["Apologies,"](#) which are writings that defend the Christian faith, [martyrdom](#), [monasticism](#), and the [Catechetical School of Alexandria](#).

The passion for evangelism did not stop at the end of the apostolic period, but continued through the lives of those Christians, who influenced the lives of non-Christians. Those who were converted to Christianity experienced happiness, joy, love, forgiveness, meekness, politeness, and kindness in their lives at a time when those virtues were hard to come by. In addition, Christians did not evangelize with their lives only but with their words. Missions moved to all directions of the world to spread the Christian faith.

Martyrdom:

It is fair to say that Christianity was greatly spread through [martyrdom](#), which continued until the edict of Milan in 313 AD. As [Tertullian](#) said during this time, ["The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed"](#)¹. [St. Justin Martyr](#) explained the reason:

["For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus. For just as if one should cut away the fruit-bearing parts of a vine, it grows up again, and yields other branches flourishing and fruitful; even so the same thing happens with us"](#).²

Many martyrs, including St. George, attracted thousands of people to Christianity during their tortures, because there is

no witnessing better than showing suffering for a religion, facing death without fear, and at the same time showing love to all, including the executioner. These martyrs continued to evangelize while in the midst of their trials and tortures. They never failed to evangelize by words, merciful actions towards all, including those who persecuted them, and by miracles.

Monasticism:

When martyrdom era ceased, [monasticism](#) was the great net that attracted many souls to the Christian faith. It presented people with a way to abandon every pleasure of the secular life in order to attain heavenly joy for which humankind has an everlasting thirst. Through the lives of hermits, monks, and nuns, people saw the work of the eternal kingdom of God. Their spiritual model of life turned out to be one of the most powerful methods of evangelism, which some people called "[passive evangelism](#)."

Catechetical School of Alexandria³:

We cannot forget the evangelism done by the great [Catechetical School of Alexandria](#), which attracted people not only from all Egypt, but also from all over the world. This was so because evangelism was a passionate desire of its teachers and students alike. This school followed the evangelistic style of St. Paul who occasionally used philosophy and dialogue in his evangelism. The direct dialogues with the educated of this time won many souls to Christ. The light of the spiritual life of the teachers and students attracted people to Christ.

[In an educated society, like that of the USA, we need to adopt a similar approach to evangelism.](#) Sometimes we're afraid of getting into a dialogue with others, when the fact is that a respectful dialogue could be a great way to make others aware of the need for salvation through Jesus Christ.

The Fourth & Fifth century:

The fourth and fifth centuries witnessed the firm establishment of Christianity in the Roman Empire. In fact, during this period Christianity conquered a mighty empire. Faith had made significant progress in Africa, Western Asia, and many European countries. Robert Linder summarized the

reasons for this staggering growth saying: “the preaching of the dynamic message of the gospel which brought new hope and peace with God through a crucified and risen Christ to hundreds of thousands of people. Furthermore, the movement ...attracted individuals who were able to grapple with the doctrinal issues of the age and to refute attacks upon the faith by pagan intellectuals.⁴”

Catechetical instructions were developed by saintly bishops, such as St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. They used the Lent as a period of preparations of the catechumens (newly illuminated), which included daily prayers and instructions presented by the bishop. Then those who were proven worthy of baptism get baptized just before the resurrection Divine Liturgy and took part in the procession of the resurrection, wearing their white garments and holding candles.⁵

In addition, this era witnessed great evangelistic works done in many places, as in **Nobia** and **Ethiopia** led by the Coptic Orthodox Church. Another joyful event that took place in the fifth century was **the evangelistic work done by St. Patrick in Ireland**, who came to complete the missionary efforts started earlier by Egyptian monks. Those monks evangelized in Ireland, spread Christianity, established monasteries, and taught monks how to make copies of the classics⁶. The revival of the European Renaissance was based on the classic books saved by those monasteries. So, in a way, we can say that the Copts saved the World civilization.

The fifth century witnessed the horrible schism of the church for the first time in history, which was followed by more schisms that left most of the Christian world in a defense position. Some churches tried to prove the supremacy of their theology, and even to impose it on others, unfortunately, sometimes even by force. In the middle of all of these sad events, evangelism as an objective was faded dramatically.

Christian evangelism somehow subsided after the fifth century, because of altering concentration from evangelism to internal heresies and conflicts. Generally speaking, **the**

objective of evangelism was lost in the middle of all the changes that happened in the church at that time. Sadly to say, sometimes becoming closer to the emperor palace, gaining authority, and reaching fame and richness gradually replaced the zeal for others' salvation. In some places, the world entered into the church, while the opposite was supposed to happen. The ego of some personalities replaced self-denial and carrying the cross⁷. Being underground church without necessities for centuries was soon replaced by living in richness. Some cared about their own personal gain and supremacy over others than caring about fulfilling the commandment of evangelism that was given to the Church by the Lord Himself⁸.

Although Robert Linder wrote, "Many historians feel that the acceptance of Christianity during the fourth century as the official state religion seriously damaged spirituality, as Christian leaders became confidants of emperors⁹" but the damage manifested starting from the fifth century.

Seventh Century:

Islam could not start at a better time, in the **Seventh century**, when Christians were so divided, bitterness badly existed among Christians, and the Roman Empire was on the brink of falling. The sword of Islam did not only stop evangelism, but also converted masses of people to Islam. A good example for this is the Middle East, where in a short time after Islam invading, Christianity disappeared from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia (Center of North Africa famous church where St. Augustine was a bishop), Libya, Arabia, Yemen, and Emirates. Few Christians survived in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. Lebanon and Egypt were the exception; I think Lebanon was excluded mainly because Christ preached in some of its cities and Egypt because of the blessing of a biblical prophecy¹⁰, the visit of the Holy Family¹¹, and the prayers of hundreds of thousands of Egyptian martyrs. So, Egypt survived the Islamic invasion and continued to have Christians, although with no freedom to evangelize. Since the Islamic invasion of the Middle East until now, Christian evangelism is prohibited by the power of the state and the mobs.

Therefore, you can say that evangelism was over for those nations except for a few individual cases every now and then¹². Islam reached Spain and occupied it for about seven hundred years. Without the mercy of God, Islam could have invaded Christian Europe and badly damaged Christianity there.

Notes:

- 1- Tertullian, *Apology* 50:13, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. Massachusetts, 1994
- 2- Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter 110, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. Massachusetts, 1994
- 3- Eusebius, *The Church History, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 1*, Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, pp. 1994, 224-226
Fr. Tadros Maly, *The Coptic Orthodox Church as a Church of Erudition & Theology: Alexandria, Egypt: St. George Church, 1986, pp. 3-50*
- 4- Linder, Robert, *The Christian Centuries*, In Dowley, Tim (Ed.), *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity* (p.xiii), Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987
- 5- Field, Ann, *From Darkness to Light, How One Became a Christian in the Early Church*, Ben Lomond, California: Conciliar Press, 1980, p. 6
- 6- Atiya, Aziz, *The Copts and Christian Civilization*, Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1979
- 7- Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'" Matthew (16:23-25)
- 8- Matt (28:19), Mark (16:15)
- 9- Linder, Robert, *The Christian Centuries*, In Dowley, Tim (Ed.), *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity* (p.xiv), Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987
- 10- "Blessed is Egypt My people" (Isaiah 19:24)
- 11- Matthew (2:13-18)
- 12- Starting in 2003, hundreds of thousands of Muslims from the Middle East were secretly converted to Christianity. Christian evangelism workers used Television and Internet to reach Muslims using revealing the truth about Islam as a tool