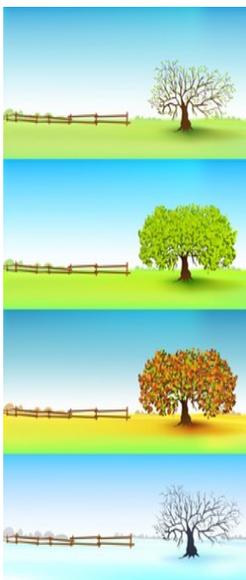




By Dr. Stewart Young

Undoubtedly the Early Church's most effective and convincing way to communicate God's timeless message of love and salvation was through the quality of lives they lived.



## Timeless Lessons from the Earliest Christians

It is quite obvious that the technological innovations that have taken place over the recent past have brought unparalleled efficiency and convenience to the life of the church. Over the last decade and a half, our Churches have not only benefited from these new technological tools but have also learned to become dependent on them. The inclusion of these information and communication tools has greatly transformed the way we worship our Lord and minister to one another towards the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Yet, with all the exciting prospects and promises that technology may hold for the Church towards the fulfillment of her mission in this ever-changing world, there are also many timeless gifts and lessons that may be gained from those who have come before us.

Recently I came across a revised paperback version of Michael Green's classic work, *Evangelism in the Early Church* in a local used bookshop. Having read this book some time ago, the 2003 edition caught my fancy. As I leafed through its pages, I noticed that the text of this revised version has remained virtually unchanged. I was able to notice only two things that were new about this "revised" edition - a new cover design and a fresh introduction by the author. As I recalled, the original edition of this work was initially released back in 1970. Then I thought, a great deal must have changed in our world since the 70's; why did the author choose to keep the work unrevised? At that moment, I decided to buy the book so I could compare with the original.

As soon as I got home I searched frantically for the original edition. And sure

enough, as I suspected, the main text of this revised work was indeed the same as the original. Contented with that, I proceeded to read the updated introduction to learn about the author's intentions. What had transpired over the past three decades, especially in the "cultural sphere," the author affirms to be widespread and influential. At the same time, the author also acknowledges optimistic signs and positive movements in the work of evangelism among many sectors of Christendom in the closing decade of the twentieth century. For this reason, he takes the opportunity to reintroduce his classic work to a new generation. But what makes this book a classic anyway? As I thought about it, I came to the conclusion that the timelessness of this work did not merely rest upon its meticulous scholarship or readability. Instead, this work is simply a story about a generation of Christians who loved their Lord and were passionately committed to carry out the task of fulfilling the Great Commission.

There is no doubt that the world of today has changed much since the days of first century Christians. In spite of the apparent differences, the author believes that there also are numerous similarities that today's Internet-surfing, social-networking generation of believers share with their processors from the pioneering generation of believers from the first century. These include commonalities in conditions such as the presence of widely understood universal languages; prevailing forms of government that guarantee religious liberty; the relative ease of travel and communication, and ultimately people who are disenchanting with the purpose of life and faith. He then highlights

five important lessons through which contemporary believers can learn and be inspired by how the earliest Christians lived and carried the task of evangelism. So what are these timeless lessons? And what makes these so timeless and meaningful for Christians today?

1. *Standing Firm on the Truth* – The most distinguishing feature which characterized the early believers was their sincere confidence and commitment to the truthfulness of the Gospel message. For one to be a “Christian” or “Christ follower” in the first and second century context meant that they must be prepared for a life that radically defies social conventions. The concept of “conversion” as illustrated by the Christian’s radical departure or turning away from a sinful way of life towards an intimate and exclusive faith in Christ was virtually unknown during those days. That was because religious affiliation for an average person during the Greco-Roman world was typically marked by a system of religiosity characterized with outright syncretism and non-exclusive loyalty to any one power or deity. The early Christian’s complete and total allegiance to Christ was based on his unwavering confidence and deep conviction that the Gospel is God’s eternal truth and the hope for all mankind. In essence, the reality of Jesus Christ and the Gospel message was not only a historical fact or religious truth that existed in their minds. It was also manifested in all aspects of their life, even when it meant going against all norms of society.

2. *Passion for the Gospel* – The earliest Christians were convinced that within the message of the Gospel of Christ is the key to eternal life. For them, this was God’s message of hope and salvation for mankind. The awareness of this wonderful reality inevitably suggests that it is hardly imaginable for one to go on through life without the knowledge of it. Because of their absolute certainty in the saving power of God, the Gospel of Christ for them was not something to be ashamed of. Instead, the early Christians sincerely proclaimed the Good News passionately and proactively wherever they went regardless of their status and profession in society. They were committed to proclaim the Gospel of life and hope to all they may come across.

After all, everyone is a sinner in desperate need of salvation. The churches likewise were also committed to the work of the Gospel. They intentionally sought to train and equip people to carry out this evangelistic endeavor as a way of life.

3. *Flexible yet Uncompromising in Proclaiming the Gospel* – In their process of proclaiming and presenting the Gospel, the early believers showed an amazing capacity to creatively connect and engage people regardless of their social position or outlook. In the same token, they were also careful that this flexibility in the communication process did not compromise the



truths of the message. In essence, the early believers did not water down the message in order to make it more palatable for their listeners. They simply recognized the divine origin and efficacy of the Gospel; thus they did not see the need to compromise the integrity of the original message. Proclaiming the Gospel for them was tantamount to communicating the eternal message of God’s grace in such a way that people could understand it. In other words, the Gospel is God’s power unto salvation and that message was passionately shared in the most natural and down-to-earth way.

4. *Transformed Lives and Lifestyles* – Undoubtedly the Early Church’s most effective and convincing way to communicate God’s timeless message of love and salvation was through the quality of lives they lived. Since action speaks louder than words, the impact that their transformed lives had on their world was undeniably real and far-reaching. Early Christians did not just verbally proclaim the message of Christ; they also demonstrated their faith through their daily lives and actions. Moreover, the social and spiritual transforming effect and impact of individuals were greatly multiplied and intensified with the collective gatherings of like-minded people known as the Church. The Early Church’s radically wonderful and spiritual way of life defied all natural human conventions while its greatest virtue was most eloquently and powerfully expressed under the trauma of opposition. The veracity of the Christians’ spiritual message of eternal hope and life is often testified and confirmed through the grace and courage they show under the gravest pressures, threats, criticisms, persecutions, and even executions.

5. *Dependence on the Power of the Holy Spirit* – Evangelism in the Early Church was not done with any particular technique or innovative methods as much as it was a demonstration of God’s power through everyday living. The message of the Good News was shared in the most natural way in the context of everyday personal interaction - may it be in the workplace or in the privacy of homes. Since the Gospel truth is a living reality in the hearts of believers, this living reality was shared with the utmost earnestness and generosity. Furthermore, since the work of evangelism is ultimately a spiritual one, the early believers were fully committed to be led by the power of the Holy Spirit. The believer’s role was to simply allow God the Holy Spirit to work in them to become Christ-like. This dependency on the Spirit’s power in turn enabled God to work through them as channels of God’s blessings by using the grace-gifts that were given to them. As a result, the manifestation of all that is gained is a spiritual and a divinely approved one. It is not something that is done through the intelligence of men but by the power of God.