

Essential Factors that Contributed to the Growth of the Church in the Subapostolic Age

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the factors that led to the explosive growth of the Church in the subapostolic period, despite the vacuum of authority and missionary strategy left by the death of Christ's apostles. Some of these factors, such as the exercise of supernatural gifts, the dedication of itinerant prophets to bring the Gospel to as many people as possible, the synagogue system and the prevalence of Jewish proselytism, Hellenized culture, Roman infrastructure, and the rise of mystery religions are attested to in the literature. However, in this research paper, we suggest that a decisive role in the spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire was played by Christian laymen who believed it was their responsibility to carry the message of salvation to the ends of the earth.

KEYWORDS: church, growth, apostolic fathers, mission, evangelism, subapostolic age

Introduction

The Church of the apostolic period experienced explosive numerical growth. Within a short time of its founding, the number of men who believed in Christ "reached nearly five thousand" (Acts 4:4). Green (1970, 13) states that ten years after Christ's resurrection and ascension there were churches not only in Jerusalem but also in Alexandria and Antioch. According to Bokkenkotter (2004, 18), by the end of the first century AD there were at least 40 churches in North Africa, Asia Minor, Arabia and Greece, and by the end of the second century AD there were active churches throughout the Roman Empire and as far away as Mesopotamia (Green 1970, 13). According to the historian Eusebius, the apostles assumed the role of taking the Gospel "to the ends of the earth".

Such was the condition of the Jews. Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were dispersed throughout the world. Parthia, according to tradition, was allotted to Thomas as his field of labor, Scythia to Andrew, and Asia to John, who, after he had lived some time there, died at Ephesus. Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion. And at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way. What do we need to say concerning Paul, who preached the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and afterwards suffered martyrdom in Rome under Nero? (Eusebius Pamphilus, III.1:1-3).

However, the apostolic age ended around AD 90-95 with the death of John, the last surviving apostle and the last canonical writer (Goppelt 1970, 108), and the post-apostolic or sub-apostolic period began (McGuckin 2017, 76). The fall of Jerusalem, the dispersion of the Jews throughout the world, and the death of Christ's last apostles marked a turning point in the Church's history and produced a significant shift in mission strategy. The center of Christianity moved from Jerusalem to Antioch and then to Rome. Conzelman (1973, 28) states that during this period, Christians were no longer interested in registers and numbers but concentrated all their efforts on evangelism and church planting. Therefore, instead of the impact of Christianity fading with the end of the apostolic age, it experienced an unprecedented expansion. What were the factors that contributed to the enthusiasm for the mission and, thus, the growth of the Church? In addition to the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, Green (1970, 200) and Harnack (1972, 253) bring up two major factors, namely the exercise of ecstatic (supernatural) gifts and itinerant prophets.

While accepting the contribution of these two factors, attested in the literature, Stetzer (2002, 4) suggests four other determining causes for the expansion of Christianity: the existing synagogue system and the prevalence of Jewish proselytism, Hellenized culture, Roman infrastructure, and mystery religions. In addition to these factors, this research paper will present a seventh factor that contributed decisively to the expansion of Christianity in the subapostolic period, but which is not adequately mentioned in the literature, namely the missionary zeal of the laity. In what follows, we will briefly explore each of these factors.

Clearly, the Early Church had evangelism as its main purpose. But Terry (1994, 27) notes that while the Church had missionary zeal, it lacked a well-defined strategy. Therefore, the exercise of supernatural gifts (speaking in tongues and its interpretation, prophecy and healing) played an important role in Christian mission from after the death of the apostles until the emergence of monarchical episcopacy. Quadratus of Athens wrote around 126 AD in his Apology to Emperor Hadrian:

The works of our Saviour, moreover, were always present, because they were real, and consisted in the healing of those who had been sick of their diseases, in the testimony of those who had been raised from the dead, who not only were seen while they were being healed and raised, but were then constantly seen. [These] remained not only during the Saviour's stay on earth, but also for a considerable time after His departure; and, indeed, some of them have survived even to the present day (Eusebius IV.3:1-2).

According to Aune (1983, 189), "institutional forces have led to the disappearance of prophecy and ecstatic phenomena in the traditional church." The Montanist controversy of the second century accelerated this process, and ecstatic phenomena ceased to be a major problem in the life of the Church. Consequently, it can be seen that the transition from the exercise of supernatural charismas to the rigid structure and Greek philosophy changed the way the Church did mission. From the second half of the second century onwards missionaries were rarely mentioned, but the growth of the Church was not as explosive. Gradually, Christianity solidified and became institutionalized, soon becoming a state religion.

Traveling prophets

While there is a wealth of material addressing the role and impact of prophecy in the New Testament, the same cannot be said of the missiological role of the itinerant prophets (also called "wandering prophets") in the immediate subapostolic era. In response to Paul's missionary efforts, two types of ministries emerged in the Church: teachers, who were responsible for teaching the teachings of Christ as they received them from the apostles, and prophets, who spoke and interpreted messages they received from God (Crowe 1997, 59). The congregational nature of prophecy is mentioned frequently in the Pauline epistles, the apostle considering it necessary in worship services and could be professed by any individual upon whom the Holy Spirit was at work. Consequently, the traditional view is that prophecy played a fundamental role in strengthening the Church, but disappeared as the Church grew. Von Campenhausen argues that the missionary strategy of the early Church rested on the exercise of this (and other) supernatural gifts. He speaks of the fact that prophecies, revelations, and healings were common in the Early Church (von Campenhausen 1997, 57). The Didache, which mentions bishops and deacons only once, reserves two of its sixteen chapters for the nature and role of prophets. It mentions that they, together with the apostles, being endowed with supernatural gifts, went from city to city to strengthen the churches, so that the churches had to receive them as Christ Himself.

Concerning the apostles and prophets, according to the dogma of the Gospel, do so: Let every apostle who comes to you be received as Lord, but let him remain only one day, and if need be, the second day; but if he remains three days, he is a false prophet. Let the apostle, when he departs, take nothing but bread until he finds another home; but if he asks for money, he is a false prophet. Do not tempt or criticize any prophet,

who speaks in the spirit, that "every sin will be forgiven, but this sin will not be forgiven." But not everyone who speaks in the spirit is a prophet, but only if he has the Lord's conduct. So, by his behavior the false prophet and the prophet will be known. Any prophet who in the spirit orders a meal does not eat from it unless he is a false prophet. Every prophet who teaches the truth, if he does not do what he teaches, is a false prophet. Every tried-and-true prophet, who works in the worldly mystery of the Church, but does not teach others to do what he himself does, let him not be judged by you, for he with God has judgment; so, did the ancient prophets. But if one says in the spirit, "Give me money or something else," do not listen to him; but if he says and it is given to him for others who are destitute, let no one judge him. (...) Any prophet who wants to settle with you "is worthy of his food". Likewise, the true teacher "is also worthy as the worker of his food". But take all the fodder of the flax, of the field, of the oxen and of the sheep, and give the fodder to the prophets, for they are your chief priests. And if you have no prophet, give it to the poor. If you make bread, take the leaven and give it according to the commandment. Likewise, if you open a vessel of wine or oil, take the leaven and give it to the prophets. Take, according to thy estimation, the burnt-offering of thy silver, and of thy garments, and of all thy substance, and give it according to the commandment (Didache 1903, 7-9).

Thus, as the Didache records, the exercise of the prophetic gift was one of the main ways of spreading the Gospel at that time (Green 1970, 172). Polycarp of Smyrna (70-155 AD), Quadratus (during the reign of Hadrian: 117-138 AD), Cerinthus (late 1st century AD - early 2nd century), Ammia of Philadelphia (100-150 AD), or Melito of Sardis (d. 190 AD) are identified as prophets (Farnell 1992, 277). The prophet seemed to be the main evangelist and missionary of the Church at the end of the first century AD. Aune argues that the prophetic gift continued until the advent of monarchical episcopacy, when institutional forces led to its demise (Aune 1983, 189). The transition from leadership by grace to institutional ecclesiastical leadership led to a major shift in the Church's missiological strategy, and this happened quite quickly, as the Didache emphasizes the role of prophets in the Church, while Ignatius already emphasizes monarchical episcopacy.

The synagogue system and the prevalence of Jewish proselytism

Frend (1984, 42) states that Judaism was the most important religion in the Greco-Roman world in the days of Christ. Some estimates suggest that up to 12% of the population of the Roman Empire was Jewish, with between 4 and 4.5 million Jews spread throughout Rome's area of influence (Harnack 1972, 10). It is estimated that over a million Jews lived in Egypt alone (Green 1970, 128). Diaspora Jewish communities were vibrant and influential, and synagogues were at their center, with a synagogue or meeting place in almost every major city. Christian missionaries therefore used these resorts to present the Gospel. Moreover, the Jews had prepared the Roman world for proselytism, and during the late first and early second centuries AD, Judaism experienced a renewed passion for mission (Harnack 1972, 10). Some New Testament readers may miss the following point, but in his "woes" to Israel's religious leaders, Christ said: "Woe to you, scribes and hypocritical Pharisees! For you compass the sea and the earth about to make a fellow believer, and when he has become a fellow believer, you make him a son of hell, twice as bad as you are yourselves" (Matthew 23:15). Therefore, even if the intentions of the Judaizers were not what God intended, the prevalence of Jewish proselytism and the existing synagogue system facilitated the Christian missionaries' efforts to expound the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Bull (1967, 21) notes that "Every synagogue represented a ready-made base for Christian preaching. From it came the nucleus of Jewish and non-Jewish believers who were to form the local church."

At first, Christianity was perceived in the Diaspora as a reform movement of Judaism, but later the two religions drifted apart, and by the end of the second century the Church had

added the Ebionites (Jewish Christians) to the list of heretics. The author of the Epistle of Barnabas (ca. 130 AD) argued that the Jews, by rejecting Christ, were no longer God's elect (*Epistle of Barnabas*, XVI.5). Despite this, the reality is that the existing synagogue system and the state of Judaism at the time gave the Christian faith a boost in its later development.

Hellenistic culture

Hellenization allowed the creation of a common language and culture throughout the Roman Empire, and this fostered, at least at a superficial level, a shared worldview. Greek, the language used for centuries to express the thoughts of the greatest thinkers, had become the *lingua franca*, and the Gospel could be transmitted quite easily in this linguistic environment. But Hellenization was not limited to language. Green (1970, 18) points out that suspicion of powerless deities made it easier for the citizens of the Roman Empire to accept a new faith that consisted 'not in words but in power' (cf. 1 Cor. 4:20)." Christianity was able to offer more than existing religions, and people responded positively.

Roman infrastructure

The Roman Empire's vast network of roads, stretching from the Atlantic to Arabia and from northern England to the Nile (some of which are still in use today), and its transportation system, allowed travel throughout the known world at that time (Bull 1967, 2). Between the paved roads or wilderness travel, Christians invariably chose the former. In addition, the impact of the so-called *pax romana* is worth considering. Although there were occasional riots, this peace lasted from 27 BC to 96 AD, and the Church took full advantage of the opportunity (Davies 1965, 34). The presence of Roman legions throughout the empire offered safety and free passage to missionaries who could travel throughout the empire (Fanning 2009, 7). Within only sixty years, Christians had reached a considerable number of major cities.

The rise of mystery religions

The decline of the sciences and the rise of religion also helped the expansion of the Church. While the state religions were increasingly discredited, mystery religions such as Mithraism, devotion to Jesus, and the cult of Cybele, which catered especially to the marginalized (although they were also practiced by emperors such as Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius), seemed to have much in common with Christianity, including baptism, a ritual meal, the promise of life after death, freedom from guilt, or union with the divine (Newsome 1992, 27-30). The difference was that the mystery religions only promised these eternal benefits, whereas Christianity offered them. Harnack notes that in a culture with a strong belief in demons and exorcisms, Christianity was well received because of its proclamation of Christ's supremacy over demons (Harnack 1972, 156-157). These factors provided an unhopd-for opportunity for the Gospel to spread throughout the empire and grow from a small Jewish sect to the state religion of the Roman Empire in just three centuries.

The missionary zeal of lay people

In addition to the factors mentioned, we suggest that there is at least one other factor that is not mentioned much in the literature, but which may have been essential to the expansion of the Church in the first two centuries, namely the missionary zeal of the laity. Beginning in Acts, local churches began sending out groups of two to four itinerant missionaries to evangelize new territories (cf. Acts 13:1-3; 13). Some of these were evangelists, prophets and teachers recognized by the Church, but others were lay people. Although Luke mentions this tangentially in Acts 8:1, Green (1970, 243-244) is of the opinion that the laity contributed most to the evangelization of the world "not by formal preaching, but by informal conversations (...) in homes and shops, in ordinary walks and around market stalls (...) they

did it naturally, enthusiastically (...) having found a treasure, they wanted to share it with others to the extent of their ability.”

Most frequently, the laity fulfilled their missionary responsibilities in relation to their immediate fellows: blood relatives, servants, friends or clients. When the head of the household converted to Christianity (such as the centurion Cornelius, Lydia, and the Philippian jailer), his own home became the epicenter of his ministry, and the Gospel was shared with all members of the household, neighbors, and friends. Drawing on the example of Philip, who led Nathanael to Christ, Green relates how Pantaenus helped Clement of Alexandria to know Christ, Justin helped Tatian to convert to Christianity, and Octavian helped Minucius Felix (Green 1970, 243-244). The means most commonly used at that time to spread the Gospel were:

a) Public preaching. All Christians literally believed that it was their responsibility to contribute to the fulfillment of the Great Commission by publicly proclaiming the Gospel of salvation. Lacking a well-structured missionary strategy, ordinary Christians followed the model of Christ's disciples in the first century AD and proclaimed God's Word "in season and out of season", anywhere, anytime and to anyone. Historian Will Durant (1944) states that: "Almost every convert, with the ardor of a revolutionary, became the instrument of Christian propaganda." With no weapons but truth and no banner but love, Christ's followers, united by a common purpose and an unquenchable love, traveled by sea and land throughout the empire and joyfully shared their new faith. Whether they were householders or successful merchants, slaves or freemen, educated or less educated, they used every opportunity to promote the cause of Christ. Even when they were exiled, they proclaimed the Gospel with infectious zeal.

b) Personal example. High ethics, uncompromising, character ennobled by knowledge of God and awareness of His presence, left an impression hard to dispute on the unsaved people with whom Christians came in contact.

c) Placing their own homes at the disposal of God's work. The wealthier and more influential Christians placed their own homes at God's disposal, both for fellowship meetings and for receiving strangers. This contributed significantly to the growth of the Church.

d) Catechizing new converts and training future leaders. Seeking to fulfill Christ's command to teach the newly converted "all that he has commanded" (cf. Matthew 28:20), subapostolic Christians believed in the effectiveness of discipleship. Each church was in charge of catechizing its own converts. Later, the theological schools in Antioch, Alexandria, Edessa and Caesarea took on the role of theological education of Christians for missionary and evangelistic responsibilities. Harnack (1972, 362) recalls that Gregory the Wonderworker, who later became a bishop, was converted by Origen at the school in Alexandria.

e) Public debates were another effective tool for evangelizing the unsaved. The little written Christian literature was used by Christians to polemicize with their accusers. Thus, in the post-apostolic period, immediately after the Apostolic Fathers, a generation of outstanding apologists emerged, such as Quadratus, Aristinus of Pella, Justin Martyr, Tatian the Assyrian, Miltiades, Apollinaris of Hierapolis, Melito of Sardis. Theophilus of Antioch, Athenagoras the Athenian, Tertullian or Minucius Felix (Rotaru 2005, 219-224).

f) The courageous depositions before the judges were another means by which subapostolic Christians made their faith public. One of the most remarkable examples is that of Polycarp of Smyrna, who declared to the imperial representative who threatened him with death: "I have served my Lord for eighty-six years and he has never done me any harm. How could I deny my King, who has hitherto kept me from all evil and redeemed me with so much faith?" (Eusebius IV.15.10).

g) Social involvement. Since the early days of the Church, Christians have been involved in helping the disadvantaged: widows, orphans, the poor and strangers (cf. Acts 6:1-6). Harnack (1972, 152-153) argues that the Church became so involved in feeding the

hungry, supporting the poor financially, helping widows and orphans, housing strangers, caring for the blind, enslaved, imprisoned or condemned to death, and arranging for their burial, that evangelism became synonymous with outreach.

The involvement of the laity in the work of evangelization and mission had an unexpected impact on the dynamics of the Church in the post-apostolic period. Endowed with special gifts or simply with a pure love for the unsaved and a great passion for spreading the Gospel, they worked tirelessly for the advancement of the Gospel and the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusions

In this article, we noted that despite the void caused by the death of Christ's apostles, the Church has experienced explosive growth, thanks to the missionary zeal of Christians. Although they did not have a well-defined missionary strategy, the faithful of the Apostolic Fathers' time had much enthusiasm. The emphasis on grace, especially supernatural grace, and the devotion of itinerant prophets and teachers helped to spread the Gospel effectively. The synagogue system and the prevalence of Jewish proselytism provided an unparalleled platform for Christian missionaries and evangelists to present Christ. The fact that the Greek language had become the *lingua franca* and Christians could spread the Gospel in a language understood throughout the empire, as well as the advantage of travelling thousands of miles on the immense network of Roman roads, also favored the rapid spread of Christianity. The popularity of mystery religions, which promised much but offered little, was also exploited by Christians as they sought to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. But one of the most important aspects of the expansion of Christianity in the subapostolic period, but unfairly neglected in the literature, is the missionary zeal of the laity (Rotaru 2023, 62-79). They took every opportunity to share the message of salvation through Christ with their fellow men and women, both in public and private places, literally believing that it was the responsibility of every Christian to help fulfill the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20. Love for God and the desire to see sinners restored led them to give up their personal comforts and missionize in all parts of the Roman Empire. Their personal example, high ethics, and character ennobled by the knowledge of God left a strong impression on those with whom they came in contact. The fact that they placed their own homes at the disposal of God's work, that they were concerned with the catechization of new converts and the raising up of future leaders, that they were not afraid to engage in public debate with their opponents, or that they boldly declared their faith before judges, even at the cost of their lives, were factors that contributed to the unprecedented expansion of the church. Moreover, their social involvement was so impressive that it became one of the most powerful evangelistic tools of the subapostolic church (Rotaru 2010, 7). Unfortunately, with the advent of monarchical episcopacy and the trend towards institutionalization of the Church, there has been an obvious shift in the way the Church has done mission and evangelism. From the second half of the second century onwards, itinerant missionaries are mentioned less and less, and the rate of growth of the Church has slowed down noticeably.

The contemporary Church (Rotaru 2012, 5), having much easier opportunities and means to do mission and evangelism, must look to the example of the post-apostolic Church. Travel to most parts of the world is becoming easier, cheaper and safer. English is spoken in almost every corner of the world, and this allows missionaries to communicate more easily with non-evangelized people. The high level of wealth of Christians in Western countries could lead to greater and more effective involvement in helping the disadvantaged. Today's Church has all the means at its disposal to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, all that is needed is love for the unevangelized, a desire to contribute to the extension of the Kingdom of God and a renewed missionary zeal (Rotaru 2017, 57-76).

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