How Did the Explosive Growth in the Early Church Happen?
Matt 13:31-33, 16:18

Today’s sermon is what I call an “illustrated sermon” and our illustrations will come from church history. In an illustrated sermon we take a simple, straightforward truth from the Bible and spend most of our time illustrating that truth rather than explaining the passage.

PROPOSITION: God uses hard situations, simple witness about Jesus and sacrificial actions by believers to bring the truth to multitudes of unbelievers.

I. Jesus will grow His church

A. He will use our personal witness

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus said “on this rock on this confession of Peter that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the Living God” I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Simply put, Jesus will build His church and He will use our spoken word testifying about Jesus as a key part of that. The simplest Christian today can speak more clearly about Jesus than the best of the Old Testament because we live after the bodily resurrection of Jesus which confirms all the Lord said.

B. The church is part of the Kingdom of heaven

Now Jesus Himself doesn’t use the word “church” much. Instead He uses a more expansive term! Over 120 times, Jesus refers to “the Kingdom of God” or “the Kingdom of Heaven.” These terms refer to the rule or reign of God. Now look at v 19. READ. So there is a direct tie between “the Kingdom of Heaven” and the church in verses 18 & 19. The church, with Jesus as the Head, is a key part of the Kingdom of Heaven. Now turn over to Matthew 13.

C. The church (universal) will grow to be large

So when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God – those truths apply to the church today. READ v 31-32. Notice that Jesus says the Kingdom of heaven, which includes the church, will grow very large. Like the mustard seed – it starts out small – just 120 followers of Jesus were in the upper room meeting together after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. But that tiny seed grew to be the biggest of plants and today Christianity is the largest faith in the world by a big margin.

D. The church will penetrate all areas

Jesus also points out that the church will penetrate all areas of the world. READ v 33. Even though the church seems small at first – like yeast, it quickly multiplies and penetrates all areas of the dough. So today we find Christians in every country, education level, social standing and almost every language & ethnic group. This powerful and explosive growth was especially seen in the first three centuries of the Christian church. That small band of 120 hidden away in an insignificant point in the
Universe multiplied to be $\frac{1}{2}$ the Roman Empire. How did this happen? What did God use to trigger this incredible growth?

II. God worked through …

A. Epidemics (also true of major natural disasters)

One surprising thing God used were a couple of epidemics that devastated the empire. In 165 AD, during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, there was a devastating epidemic that went through the Roman Empire — it was probably the first appearance of small pox in Europe. The results were devastating. The Emperor spoke of caravans of carts hauling the dead from cities. The war against Marcommanian was stopped for two years. When it was resumed they would find many soldiers dead on the fields without a single battle wound. So many people died in the cities and villages of Italy that many were abandoned and fell into ruin. Between 25% and 33% of the Roman world died during the 15 year duration of this disease — including Emperor Marcus Aurelius himself.

In 251 AD, an equally devastating epidemic again hit the Roman Empire. This time it was probably measles. It ravaged the rural areas as well as the cities. Again huge numbers died. At its height 5,000 people a day were dying in the city of Rome alone. According to Dionysius, over $\frac{1}{2}$ of Alexandria’s population died. In the Roman quest for world power and domination, it was these epidemics that did what no foreign army could — stopped the wars and cause the powerful to quake in fear.

1. Challenged pagan and Hellenistic world views

While our immediate thoughts would be all negative — early church fathers like Cyprian, Dionysius and Eusebius came to believe that epidemics actually helped the message of Jesus Christ to spread — much like Chinese Christians today say communism helped the church to grow. Now those early church fathers were clear that these plagues were awful and hit Christians hard. Cyprian wrote in 251 that “many of us are dying” from “this plague and pestilence.” A couple years later Dionysius wrote in his Easter message “out of the blue came this disease, a thing ... more frightening than any other disaster whatever.” But they went on to see how God’s bigger plan would use these tragedies to greatly advance the Kingdom of Heaven.

In what ways? When crisis happens, it naturally challenges our faith — for many this leads to a crisis of faith. People quickly find that their faith is really pretty weak and insufficient. You have seen this often. A person doesn’t go to church, put Jesus first or try to live according to the Bible. Then some tragedy strikes. What is a common response? They get mad at God. What really happened is they found their supposed faith was too wimpy to make any difference — they had a crisis of faith.
In a crisis of faith, a person's beliefs can fall short in two ways. First, their old beliefs prove insufficient to answer the question of WHY the disaster happened. Second, the old beliefs provide no meaningful hope or comfort in the tough times. Think of pagan Rome. If the priest can't tell you why the gods are angry, if your sacrifices make no difference, if your fellow believers just run away to hide hoping to escape the plague, and you are told it is just by chance whether you live or die—what comfort is that? It is when major problems come into our lives that we find out whether our beliefs are real or not. Many people who claim to be Christians around us really don't have Biblical faith. They have a wimpy blend of humanism, materialism, hedonism, and Pollyanna thinking (illogically optimistic) that uses Christian words. It takes the really big problems of life for them to have a chance to see their faulty thinking and beliefs.

2. Highlighted the hope of Christianity

As terrible as these epidemics were (with their massive loss of life), they actually demonstrated to people the superiority of Christianity as nothing else could. True Christian faith brings hope for the future even in the darkest times. The teaching of the Bible makes our life meaningful even when sudden and surprising death hits. This hope is not dependent on whether God heals us or makes our life easy now.

Listen to the words of Bishop Cyprian try to give perspective to people whose world was falling apart and their family & friends were dying back in the 200s; Real perspective and real hope, not wishful thinking.

- **the just are dying with the unjust** (so there is no “get out of jail free” card here in this life for the Christian),
- it is not for you to think that the destruction is a common one for both the evil and the good. The just are called to refreshment, the unjust carried off to torture (the paradise or judgment is what comes after we die); **protection is more quickly given to the faithful** (God does answer prayer— not by healing everyone now, but by healing or protecting some); **punishment to the faithless**.
- how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race (then he lists a number of things people should examine about themselves to see if they are behaving selfishly)
- **Although this mortality** (people dying) **has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death.** (it has made our faith more real and gutsy)
- “Our brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before…
- Acknowledging the huge death rate, Dionysius noted that although this terrified the pagans, Christians greeted the epidemic as merely “schooling and testing.”
Wow! That is powerful Christianity – that is evidence of a genuine relationship with the God of this Universe! No one is going to change their beliefs until their current beliefs are seen as inadequate and other beliefs are seen as superior. God uses the really terrible situations of life to break down false belief, call Christians to a higher faith and demonstrate the superiority of Jesus. Currently, evangelical Christians are ridiculed for believing in absolute truth and that Jesus is the only way to heaven. God will do whatever is necessary to shake our culture up because He wants to give everyone a genuine opportunity to recognize their sin, humble themselves to repent and come to Jesus Christ alone as their Savior and Lord. This idea that all religions are the same will be proven absolute nonsense. The different faiths say contradictory things today – they can’t all lead to the same place. It is also through these tough times that we come to see that we have far more hope to share than we ever imagined. The more I researched this, the more I realized what we fear about the near future is actually what God often uses to propel the church forward in marvelous ways. We really can’t lose. If good is coming, we use it to expand the work of God. If tough times are coming, God will use them to open far more doors to genuine witness than we have now. That really changes how we look at the current events around us.

3. Led to sacrificial acts of compassion by believers.
   But not only did Christianity offer explanation and comfort for the plague, but it also provided a prescription for action – what do you do when massive numbers of people are dying, it looks like your culture is crumbling and no one knows why or what to do about it? You don’t worry about yourself, but you get out there and join God in reaching a lost world (repeat). Christians didn’t know how to stop the epidemic, but they did know how to show love & care for those who were dying. Instead of running away just to protect themselves and leaving sick friends and family to fend for themselves, Christians went in to the plagued areas to do basic care for those who were sick & dying as well as bury the dead. Dionysius wrote a lengthy tribute to the heroic nursing efforts of local Christian during the epidemic, many of whom lost their lives caring for others.

   “Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.”

While the epidemic had not passed over the Christians, the non-Christians fared much worse. “The heathen (non-Christian) behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated
unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.”

Here is the fascinating part. On the outside it looks like the Christians’ actions of going in and caring for the dying in the midst of a disease epidemic was the most dangerous – yet that action God calls us to actually led to substantially higher survival rates by the Christians overall. And this excludes whatever miraculous work God chose to do. When all normal services break down, the most elementary nursing greatly reduces the number of deaths in any epidemic. So the Christians caring for Christians led to more Christians surviving. Then those Christians also cared for some non-Christians – that sacrificial witness, combined with the failure of their own religion, led more non-Christians to become a Christian. Now add some additional amazing healing & protection miracles by God and the superiority of Christianity is suddenly very clear to most in the Roman Empire in ways they couldn’t deny. Putting the advancement of Christ’s kingdom first is more powerful than you & I realize, even when it looks like we are losing!

Jesus reminded His disciples that the one who is faithful in little will be faithful in much. Despite the movies, it is rare for a selfish person to suddenly become sacrificial and humble. All the little things Jesus asks us to sacrifice now for our faith (whether it is weekly time for worship or daily prayer & Bible reading, taking our turn serving others, being generous when we have little, living a God honoring moral life when society tells us we are missing all the fun) – all of these smaller sacrifices are developing us for sacrifices that will radically change those around us. In fact Jesus takes our simple sacrifices and does far more with them than we could think or imagine. Nothing significant is done without personal sacrifices.

4. Broke old relationship bonds so people more open to the new

Finally, those epidemics caused social bonds to be broken that were hindering people from becoming Christians. While you may have some doubts about your old religion, if all your friends believe that religion & talk negatively about Jesus, then you are less likely to change your faith. But with people dying & your non-Christians running away to protect themselves, it broke those social bonds so non-believers were more willing to consider the claims of Jesus Christ. When you read the news and worries about the future begin to overwhelm you, go back and affirm that, as Pastor Arthur said last week, God can squeeze triumph out of even the worst tragedy.

B. Turmoil

Let me just mention some other ways God used the turmoil the average person faced regularly to expand the church.

1. Opposition to Christians
The opposition to Christians by those outside actually ended up strengthening the church. There are far fewer nominal and fake Christians in the church when it is unpopular to be a Christian! The genuine believers at that time were more committed, they were sharing their faith more and they were more sacrificial in their service to others.

2. Strong standards/demands for Christians
While the early Christians were mostly poor, they were asked to do much. (1) They were to live a moral life in an immoral culture, (2) they were to witness to others even though they were despised, and (3) they were to give generously even though they had little. Humanly speaking, it would seem these higher standards God calls His people to would result in LESS people coming to faith in Jesus. BUT since most people change faith through interpersonal contacts, non-believers simply couldn’t ignore this level of dedication from people they actually knew in their life, despite the negative statements of society.

3. Martyrdom
God’s call that we should never deny Jesus and that we should worship no one but Jesus led to incredible persecution. The fact that Christians didn’t back down but faced the threat of beatings and death with bravery & steadfastness was an incredible witness to people. Galen, the famous doctor to the Emperors, said of Christians, “their contempt of death is patent to us every day.” Their lack of fear of death is clear to us non-believers every day. They couldn’t get away from this witness no matter how much they wanted to hate Christians.

4. Physical misery
Ancient cities were small in area but packed with people. Originally built as fortresses, it was extremely expensive to expand. The city of Antioch was ½ the size of Barre City and had 150,000 people living in it rather than our 8,000 – that’s 117 people per acre – which is about the same as Calcutta, India today. How does that compare with Vermont cities? Barre, Burlington, & Rutland cities average 4 people per acre. Winooski city is the top in the state with 7.5 people per acre. Montpelier & Newport are only 1 person per acre. Chicago averages 26 per acre – Manhattan 100 per acre but it uses very high buildings. You can imagine the frustration and problems from 117 people being crammed into each one acre so tightly. The buildings were only 5 stories at the most. And for every one private house in a city there averaged 26 blocks of tenement buildings. The streets were often as narrow as a foot path – you could easily talk to a person in the building across the street just by leaning out your window. Then there are the cooking fires with no chimneys, the lack of indoor plumbing, etc.. There was a level of physical misery we can’t imagine which God used to pull people out of slavery to the false, the demonic and to the eternally destructive.

5. Social misery
God also used the social misery in the cities. Because of high death rates, new people from new ethnic groups were constantly coming into the city. So there was not a lot of social unity or relational closeness. Roman government stressed outward peace. We feel that in our land today. More focus is on what separates us than what we have in common. Again, when we look back in history we see that God can use these times of societal conflict to build His church just as much as He can use times of peace and prosperity.

III. Three keys for us today to cooperate with God’s work

So how can we cooperate with what God is doing around us to build His church? Let me share three ways we can better cooperate with God’s work, which is clear in this history:

A. Maintain friendships with people who disagree with you
   (as long as it doesn’t cause us to compromise our faith – 1 Cor 5:9-11; 15:33)

   The first is that we maintain regular contact and friendships with those who are not evangelical believers. The primary way people have always become Christians is through social contacts – friends, family, school and work associations. The early Christians never huddled away in their churches wanting to interact only with Christians. They didn’t make Christian ghettos. Whenever religious groups become closed or semi-closed – that is, whenever people stop having friends who aren’t in their group – then those groups lose their capacity to grow. Jesus wants us to have friendships with those who have different values from us AS LONG AS they are not causing us to personally compromise.

B. Get excited enough about God’s future for you that you can release worry in the present

   Second, we can’t have the kind of counter-cultural, transforming faith unless we are very confident & excited about our future in the millennium & heaven. We talked about that in the fall. Heaven is a wonderful place – filled with glory and grace – and meaningful relationships, deep worship, many successful projects, great learning & the joy of being in the presence of God Himself. The best is yet to come for us!

C. Join God in His work today regardless of obstacles.

   (Obstacles in life are an opportunity for Jesus to grow His church)

   Finally, the early Christians didn’t let obstacles stop them from joining God in His work. When they were ridiculed, they still witnessed. When danger came, they still served God, not worrying about their own safety. When they were poor, they still generously gave. Christianity didn’t grow because of some elite priesthood or because the pastors were so great (and God did raise up great pastors). The early church primarily grew because the average Christian joined God in His work in their neighborhood, their work place and their extended family. We can never plan eternal significance – but we can position ourselves so God can use us in an eternally significant way. Don’t let fear, discouragement, self or obstacles keep you from the destiny God has for you. For great will be our rejoicing in heaven. To God be the glory! Amen!