

A Light in the World

- Study Three

A Surviving Church

It is interesting to consider how the early Christian Church survived, considering its humble beginnings and the persecution it endured in the early centuries. Other than Paul and the small band of Apostles, we don't hear tales of 'famous' missionaries for hundreds of years. Missionary outreach happened mainly through 'ordinary' people.

Justin Martyr (born c.100 AD), in describing Christians to the Emperor wrote, "We formerly rejoiced in uncleanness of life, but now love only chastity... before we loved money and possessions more than anything, but now we share what we have and to everyone who is in need..."

When Emperor Constantine converted early in the 4th century, Christianity became legal, and persecution from the Romans ceased. Now the ground was laid bare for the faith to spread in numbers and influence. Councils at Nicea (325 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD) enabled bishops to resolve their differences over doctrine.

Differences did of course surface (cultural, religious and political) particularly between the Eastern and Western churches. These came to a



Justin Martyr

head in 1054 AD when the leader of the Eastern church was excommunicated by Pope Leo IX. Since those days, we have had both the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches operating independently.

In the 15th century some Christians in the west spoke against the abuse of authority and corruption in Christian leadership, resulting eventually in Martin Luther posting his 97 complaints against the practice of selling indulgences on a church door, for which he was excommunicated. But the 'Reformation' as it became known spread and led to the appearance of the 'Protestant' church in the west ('Protestant' is derived from the Latin protestari meaning publically declare/protest).

It would be Christians of all flavours and ideologies who began the big adventures of the 17th century onward, reaching westward as far as the New World. Quakers came to Pennsylvania, Catholics to Maryland, and Dutch Reformed to New York. Later came Swedish Lutherans and French Huguenots, English Baptists and Scottish Presbyterians.

Mission Focus - Tearfund

Tearfund (The Evangelical Alliance Relief Fund) arose out of World Refugee Year in 1960 and the terrible Biafra famine of 1968, caused by civil war in Nigeria.

tearfund

Working particularly in Africa, Asia and South America – and also across Eastern Europe and the UK, Tearfund follows the biblical mandate that helping communities in need is central to the purpose of local churches.

Their aim is to offer long-term support for development programmes. They work with local church partners, perhaps enabling communities to build and maintain toilet and water facilities, or providing microfinance loans for women to start a small business selling eggs or chickens.

Reacting to global crises, Tearfund are also experts in development, disaster response and disaster reduction.

Biography Corner- George Muller (b.1805)

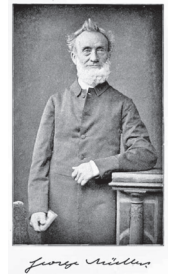
As a young boy George Müller was a thief and gambler, reportedly played cards with friends while his mother lay dying. It was at university, studying divinity but living a wild life, that he found himself at a Christian prayer meeting. It had a profound effect on his life and he subsequently gave his life to Christ, thoughts turning away from his old life and toward mission.

Müller spent a short while working among Jews in London, but illness found him recuperating in Devon, where he met lifelong friend Henry Craik who asked him to join him in ministry. As pastor of Ebenezer Chapel in Teignmouth, and now a married man, Müller established a principle that he would continue throughout his life, asking for no salary and living purely by faith, trusting God to supply every need.

In 1832 he and Craik moved to Bristol, which was to remain his base. In 1834, he founded the Scriptural Knowledge Institution for Home and Abroad, to support Christian schools and missionaries, distribute Bibles and Christian tracts, and provide Day-schools, Sunday-schools and Adult-schools. By the time of Müller's death in 1898 the organization had received and distributed the equivalent of £90m at today's value and distributed 285,000 Bibles, 1.4million New Testaments and numerous tracts translated into twenty languages.

Five orphanages were established with accommodation for 2000 children, all with a starting capital of two shillings (50 cents). Again, no requests for financial support were made, yet sufficient funds were received to establish and continue this work. His diaries provide documentary evidence of a real life of faith - 50,000 answers to prayer, of which 30,000 had been answered in 24 hours or less!

At the age of 70 following the death of his wife, Müller remarried and, rather than settle down to retirement, began a 17 year worldwide missionary journey, travelling 200,000 miles, preaching in English, French and German to around three million people, before returning to England in 1892, where he died six years later.



Sample

Making Connections

"May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.' (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)"

(Read Acts 17:16-34)

When Paul was on his missionary journeys, his day usually began in the synagogue (Acts 17:2) where he entered into discussion with all who would listen.

We know that this could be very effective because we read that "a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed". We also know that this habit upset the religious leaders, who opposed Paul and the Apostles when they dared to talk openly about Jesus and the Resurrection.

But Paul did have more than one approach to mission, and varied his technique dependent upon his audience. When preaching mainly to Jews, Paul quoted the Scriptures, but if the audience were Gentiles he often sought common ground by which he could connect, before introducing his theology.

The Athens visit was not particularly successful in terms of converts (apart from a couple of notable exceptions) but serves to remind us that the impact of mission is not always purely about numbers. Who can say what the lasting impact of one convert among the intellectual elite of Athens would have on subsequent life in the city?

Athens was a university city to where great minds and philosophers flocked. It

was a city full of golden statues to gods. There had been a devastating earthquake in the past, which the citizens attributed to a god they had upset – but they didn't know which one. They let sheep loose in the main street in the belief that they would lie down next to the statue of the god they had upset. The sheep refused to play ball and lay down in the middle of a field, so the people erected an extra altar inscribed

"To the unknown god"

in case they had missed one and upset him.

Paul intrigued these learned citizens with his debating skills so they took him to the Aereopagus on

Mar's Hill where a select court met to oversee public morals. Here Paul takes what he has seen, the altar to the unknown god, and his knowledge of Greek poets, and uses them as a way to share the Good News.

"People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you." (vs.22,23)

His message is simple. God is the Creator, not the created. God's hand is on history. Humankind instinctively searches for God and finds him through the love of Jesus.

This is just Paul's approach to mission. It is worth looking in the New Testament to see the different techniques used.

"I have but one candle of life to burn, and I would rather burn it out in a land filled with darkness than in a land flooded with light"

(John Keith Falconer)

Do it! Responding to Personal Need

Christians are called to service; Jesus was quite plain about that. He washed his disciples' feet but told them "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13:14,15)

On a personal level responding to personal need might involve raising funds for victims of natural disasters such as tsunamis, forest fires, earthquakes and floods or advocating for social or public policy reform.

It might also mean helping an elderly neighbor get to the grocery store, befriending someone who is lonely or volunteering to work for a charity store.

How does a church respond to the personal needs of the community it lives among?

Christians are involved in many ways. Organizations such as the Trussel Trust in the UK help local

churches organize food banks that can distribute provisions to households struggling to make ends meet, and for those who slip through the care net. Churches have drop-in centers and night shelters, individuals become involved in Christian counseling, offering lifts to hospitals and clinics.

"The Church is the one institution that exists for those outside it."

(William Tyndale)

The list is endless, but so are the needs, and they can be specific to individual towns and cities.

Spend some time as a church walking around the place where you are, but with eyes open not to bargains in store windows, but human need in its many forms.

Discussion

- 1) Do you think that the Church has to change the way that it communicates the gospel message in order for it to connect better with the spiritual needs of society? If so, in what ways?
- 2) Two thousand years after the Church was birthed, how well are we 'surviving' from where you are based? Splits over the centuries have given rise to many denominations. Does this help or hinder the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19?
- 3) George Müller's faith is shown by his listing of 50,000 answers to prayer. How central is prayer in the mission of your church, and can you list answers to prayer that the church has received?
- 4) How easy is it to keep a balance between supporting local and global needs?

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