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Arguers or Lovers?

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Abstract

"The early Christians, filled with the teachings of Jesus, loved people into the kingdom."

Posting about being effective Christian witnesses from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Arguers or Lovers?

Dave Schelhaas

January 6, 2022

“A Muslim man walked into the offices of a Christian pastor in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, whose congregation...has been serving Syrian refugees since the outbreak of civil war. “I’ve hated you for the past eight years,” the Muslim said, “and I’ve tried to turn my community against you. But three months ago it was your American doctors who treated me, and paid for my hospital stay. We hate these people, yet they come here and show us love. Tell me the time of your services; I want to follow Jesus. How great is your Christianity!”¹

That is the opening paragraph of an article in the December 2021 issue of *Christianity Today*. When I read it, chills ran down my spine and I thought, “Yes! That’s the way the church of Christ lives out its beliefs.” It reminded me of something I read in Andy Crouch’s book, *Culture Making*², several years ago—something that made such an impression on me that I circled it three times in my book. Crouch cites sociologist Rodney Stark’s research on this question about Christianity: “How did a movement of a few thousand adherents at most in the first century become half of the population of the empire by the fourth century?” (156) It is, obviously, a very complex question with a complex answer.

Crouch summarizes Stark’s answer as follows:

“In feature after feature of Roman culture, Christians, animated by a powerfully different story from their pagan neighbors, were boldly creative. Their lives simply did not look like their neighbors. But they were not cut off from their neighbors—the culture they created was public and accessible to all.... At least two major epidemics claimed up to a third of the population of the Roman Empire in the first centuries of the Christian era. In the face of terrible conditions, pagan elites and the priests simply fled the cities. The only functioning social network left behind was the church, which provided basic nursing care to Christians and non-Christians alike, along with a hope that transcended death.” (157)

After re-reading this passage, I decided I should read Rodney Stark’s book, *The Rise of Christianity*³, and I was happy to find it at the Dordt University Library. It is a sociological study, yet quite accessible to the ordinary reader, and it is worthy of note that other sociologists have given his research and conclusions high marks.

Here are a few more examples of the extraordinary nature of Christian love in the early church described in Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*. Stark cites the Bishop of Dionysius:

"Many 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." (82)

Emperor Julian launched a campaign in Galatia to institute pagan charities in an effort to match the Christians, but it failed. Julian complained that "the Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well..." (qtd. in Stark 84)

In his biography of Cyprian, Pontianus writes that "there is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love but that one might become perfect one should love his enemies as well.... Thus the good was done to all men, not merely the household of faith." (qtd. in Stark 87)

"Pagan and Christian writers are unanimous not only that Christian Scripture stressed love and charity as the central duty of faith, but that these were sustained in everyday behavior," says Stark. (86) "As God demonstrated his love through sacrifice," ...the early Christians demonstrated their love and sacrifice not just to one another, but "beyond the bonds of family and tribe." (87) In other words, they lived out their beliefs, daily risking their lives in the care of the sick.

Other behaviors by these early Christians were also effective in enfolding pagans into the family of God. One of the most significant was the status given to women in early Christian communities. Many pagan cultures practiced female infanticide. This, of course, was not true in Christian communities, and that reality made Christianity attractive to pagan women. "By prohibiting all forms of infanticide and abortions, Christians removed major causes of the gender imbalance that existed among pagans," and because of this, "women were more likely than men to become Christians." (Stark 99)

As I was considering these extraordinary examples of Christian love, I remembered, in contrast, a contemporary situation in which many American Christians responded to a health crisis by judging and condemning the victims of a plague rather than seeking to bring them healing. I am speaking of the AIDS crisis which came to a head in the United States in the mid-1980s.

Dr. C. Everett Koop was the United States Surgeon General during the years of the AIDS crisis. Phillip Yancey in his book, *Soul Survivor*⁴, recounts how Koop dealt with this crisis. Koop managed to be true to his Christian faith and his Hippocratic oath as he dealt with the AIDS epidemic, but he alienated a significant portion of American evangelicals in the

process. Let me paraphrase Yancey's summary of Koop's response to the AIDS crisis that had become a national concern in 1986.

For five years prior to 1986, Koop, as Surgeon General, was forbidden by the Reagan Administration to speak on the AIDS issue. Then, in 1986, Surgeon General Koop was asked by the Administration to prepare a report on the topic. His report began as follows: "At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic many Americans had little sympathy for people with AIDS. The feeling was that somehow people from certain groups 'deserved' their illness. Let us put those feeling behind us. We are fighting a disease, not people." (qtd. in Yancey 191) Koop went on to fight the disease with all the tools of science available to him.

Some Christians argued that the disease was God's judgment and ought to be allowed to run its course. Paul Weyrich, a founder of the religious right, wrote with other conservative Christians a public letter that said this about Koop, "...many believe that his statements about AIDS are a cover for the homosexual community....Dr. Koop's proposals for stopping AIDS represent the homosexuals' views, not those of the pro-family movement." (qtd. in Yancey 191) But as Yancey writes, Koop won over the gay community "by calling for compassion for the sick among them, and for volunteers to care for them." (Yancey 202)

I mention the response of some evangelical Christians to the AIDS epidemic because it was completely unlike that of Christians during the epidemics that swept through the Roman Empire. What a witness it would have been if the overwhelming voice of American Christianity had been that of the early Christians: "Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself." And who is your neighbor? As Cyprian put it so long ago, "The good was done to all, not merely the household of faith." (qtd. in Stark 87)

I have presented these examples of extraordinary love by Christians in Bekaa Valley of Lebanon in 2021, and of the earliest Christians who were citizens of the Roman empire, because I believe they show us a way to love God that was and is a miraculously effective form of evangelism. But also for this reason: I realize that some Christian churches and schools today attempt to train students to promote the Christian faith by teaching them to be heresy hunters, false practice discerners, purveyors of proof-text answers to all the knotty moral questions of our time. Even if these students "speak with the tongues of humans and of angels," they will be nothing but "clanging cymbals" if they do not show love to their listeners. The lesson of Jesus and St. Paul is that lovers, not arguers, are the most effective Christian witnesses.

If you need a Bible curriculum for children and young people, have them study the gospels. Show them how Jesus lived. Let them hear and learn what he said, and then read how his disciples passed on these lessons of Jesus. Tell them how the early Christians, filled with the teachings of Jesus, loved people into the kingdom.

Is it possible that if we teach and model these truths as we raise and educate our children, the grace and power of God's love will be made more manifest in our culture? America today is beset by a disturbing hostility—not only between Christians and non-Christians, but between Christians of different political allegiances. What can we do about it? I suggest that we return to the age-old command of Jesus: "Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself."

I suppose that sounds simplistic, but I believe that if this became common practice among Christians, we might transform culture...again!

1. Casper, Jason. "How Militants Are Made New," *Christianity Today*, Dec. 17, 2021.
2. Crouch, Andy. *Culture Making*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008.
3. Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
4. Yancey, Phillip. *Soul Survivor*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.