

The Gospel and Total Member Involvement

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Back to the Future

Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion has written extensively on the amazing growth of the early Christian church. He combines historical research with insights from the social-scientific study of religious movements and conversion. He advances four main reasons for Christianity's growth in his book, *"The Rise of Christianity"* (Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press, 1996)

He answers the question, "How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of western civilization?"

1. Social networks

Research reveals that conversions really do happen 'through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments. Personal friendships and interactions of ordinary believers are what makes the greatest difference – now as well as in the past.

2. Caring for the sick, widows and orphans

Plagues, fires and devastation from riots or war were semi-regular occurrences in the cities where the early Christians lived. Instead of fleeing to the countryside to escape these deadly events, they stayed to care for fellow believers and their pagan neighbors. The simple acts of furnishing food, water, and shelter to sick people greatly improved survival rates. It also sent a powerful message of love and solidarity to those pagans who received a helping hand. As a result, eventually many conversions resulted in such a caring faith community.

3. Their stance against adultery, abortion and infanticide

The ancient world was not kind to women and children. Married men could sleep with slaves or other women. The children of such unions were either aborted or left to die from exposure after birth. Christians were exhorted to remain faithful in marriage and spoke out against all these pagan practices. They rescued and cared for many of these babies raising them as their own.

4. A theology and life of love

The above practices grew out of the knowledge that God loves the creatures He has created and His love gives them peace and transforms their lives flowing through them in service to their friends, co-workers, neighbors, and enemies, a radical belief and practice. Theoretically it is the essence of Christianity.

In the *Rise of Christianity* Stark shows in simple math that a social religious movement numbering about 1000 in 40 AD could readily grow to as many as 30,000,000 or more by the fourth century, in spite of hostility, persecution and other challenges of the ancient world.

Christianity, compelled by God's love manifest in the above actions led to very tangible results producing 40% church growth each decade for hundreds of years. The same love revealed today in the same way will accomplish the same results.

Jesus made the following prediction in regard to His second coming, "Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold, but those who endure to the end will be saved. And the good news about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then, finally, the end will come (Matt. 24:12-14, New Living Bible).

What are the Implications. First, we must discard the idea that early church growth was the result of miraculous signs and wonders. This idea breeds complacency.

Research like Stark's provides a powerful and unmistakable lesson. Scripture and Ellen White both, as well as Tom Mercer's application of these principles in today's church leads to ordinary Christians ministering to and sharing their faith with the poor, sick, women and orphans. It is still the most effective evangelism in the modern world.

Jesus gave every person a purpose, and the early church fulfilled that purpose powered by the Holy Spirit, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28: 19). "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Our Savior's entire life was characterized by disinterested benevolence and the beauty of holiness. He is our pattern of goodness. From the beginning of His ministry, men began to comprehend more clearly the character of God He carried out in His teachings and in His own life (White, CT p. 262).

Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it" (Luke 9:23, 24).

We must all be rich in good works in this life, if we would secure the future immortal life. When the judgment shall sit, and the books shall be opened, every man shall be rewarded according to his works. Many names are enrolled on the church books that have robbery recorded against them in the ledger of heaven. And unless these repent, and work for the master with disinterested benevolence, they will certainly share in the doom of the unfaithful servant (White, Retirement Years p. 1080).

John the beloved reveals to us the bottom line, "Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God for God is love" (1 John 4:7, 8).

Love is the basis of Godliness. Whatever the profession, no man has pure love to God unless he has unselfish love for his brother. But we can never come into possession of this spirit by *trying* to love others. What is needed is the love of Christ in the heart. When self is merged in Christ, love springs forth spontaneously. The completeness of Christian character is attained when the impulse to love and bless others springs constantly from within (sanctification) – when the sunshine of heaven fills the heart and is revealed in the countenance (White, COL p. 384).

"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (1 John 5:19)

We should anticipate the sorrows, the difficulties, the troubles of others. We should enter in to the joys and cares of both high and low, rich and poor. "Freely you have received," Christ says, "freely give." (Matt. 10:8). All around us are poor tried souls that need sympathizing words and helpful

deeds. There are widows who need sympathy and assistance (White, Christ Object Lessons p. 386).

In the great white throne judgment Jesus reveals who have been saved by grace through faith, “I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you invited me into your home. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me....I assure you, when you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me (Matt. 25:35-40, NLB).

Christ on the Mount of Olives pictured to His disciples the scene of the great judgment day. And He represented its decision as turning upon one point. When the nations are gathered before Him, there will be but two classes, and their eternal destiny will be determined by what they have done or neglected to do for Him in the person of the poor and suffering (White, Desire of Ages p. 637)

A new believer may share his faith and joy in Jesus and the truth with as many as 20 people, many of them non-Christian friends. However, within ten years he will be sharing with no one because he no longer has non-believing friends. We usually like to associate with people like ourselves. Jesus prayed His Father, “I’m not asking You to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one (John 17:15).

In fact, Jesus sent them into the world as witnesses for Himself and the power of God in their own lives through faith and dependence on Him. Dr Arn and Tom Mercer have rediscovered the Jesus method of evangelism encapsulated in this statement of Ellen White and were led by God, I believe to implement it in today’s world.

“Christ’s method alone will give us true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, “Follow Me” (White, Ministry of Healing p. 143)

The leaders of God’s cause, as wise generals, are to lay plans for advanced moves all along the line. In their planning they are to give special study to the work that can be done by the laity for their friends and neighbors. The

work of God on this earth can never be finished until the men and women comprising our church membership rally to the work, and unite their efforts with those of ministers and church officers (White, Gospel Workers p. 351)

The strategy of the early church is just as effective today. Tom tells how it all started, “Back in 1979 I was asked by my senior pastor to attend a seminar by Dr. Win Arm on something called *oikos*. Neither of us had ever heard of it. I was then a youth pastor at a moderate sized church. I had been hired because the youth ministry had a grand total of about four. That’s right, four.

”It was at that particular seminar that I was introduced to the basic concept that I’m about to share with you. Of course time and experience have developed and refined it, but not too much. Its genius is that it’s truly simple.....Three years later the youth group was on the verge of outgrowing the church (300).....They “got it” just as I’m hoping you will (*Oikos, Your World Delivered*, pp. 23, 24).

Of all professed Christians, Seventh-day Adventist should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world. Ministers (and laymen) should ever be able to direct men and women to Christ, to the one who Himself declared “I am the bread of life (White, Evangelism p. 175).

If, in love, we first lead people to accept Jesus as Savior and Lord most will have no problems with other Bible teaching. Many who have grown up in the Seventh-day Adventist church have never been invited to accept Jesus as their personal Savior and wonder if they have ever been converted. See the *Adventist Review* Dec. 2017, “Did I ever become a Christian?” by Edyta Jankiewicz. She summarizes the research.

Articulating a conversion narrative can be difficult for people who have grown up in the church. Asked about their conversion, many youth initially responded with words of uncertainty and long pauses, but articulating one’s conversion narrative is an important part of Christian experience (and witness). It enhances one’s experience of God’s work of grace.

Tom Mercer introduced this extended family strategy (*Oikos*) when he became a senior pastor of a church of 150 members. Today that church has a membership of over 12,000. 8-15 is the only evangelistic method they have used.

Today *the* Seventh-day Adventist church has launched a worldwide initiative “Total Member involvement” I’ve never read or heard of anything that is as effective in every member involvement as this is. Let’s take a look. On line click on 8-15 *The World is Smaller Than You Think*. Tom Mercer tells the Story of *Total Member Involvement*. If you want your church members to be totally involved with Jesus in His work of saving the souls He died for, Online search for *Laser Church* and click on *Oikos Strategy for Church Growth*.