

A Brief History of the Christian Evangelism '1'

By Victor Beshir

During the course of history, Christian evangelism has never stopped. It started with its golden era during the apostolic period, which ended around the year 105 AD. Because of its great values, this period is covered in some detail at the end of this lesson. In the subsequent **four centuries of Christian history**, the evangelism spread out through four major factors: **the "Apologies,"** which are writings that defend the Christian faith, **evangelism work, martyrdom, and monasticism.**

It is fair to say that Christianity spread greatly by **martyrdom.** Martyrdom ended by the edict of Milan in 313 AD. As **Tertullian** said during this time, **'The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.'**¹ **St. Justin Martyr** explained the reason, **'For it is plain that, though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but the more such things happen, the more do others and in larger numbers become faithful, and worshippers of God through the name of Jesus. For just as if one should cut away the fruit-bearing parts of a vine, it grows up again, and yields other branches flourishing and fruitful; even so the same thing happens with us.'**² One martyr, like St. George, during the course of his torturing attracted thousands of people to Christianity, because there is no witnessing better than showing suffering for a religion, facing death without fear, and showing love to all including the executioner. On the other hand, **because evangelism was still a clear objective of every Christian, even martyrs while they are in the midst of their trials and torturing, they never failed to evangelize by words, merciful actions towards all including those who persecuted them, and by miracles.**

After martyrdom era ceased, **monasticism** was the great net that attracted many souls to the Christian faith. It presented people who abandoned every pleasure of the secular life in order to attain heavenly joy for which mankind has an everlasting thirst. . Through the lives of hermits, monks, and nuns, people saw the work of the eternal kingdom of God. Their spiritual module of life turned out to be one of the most powerful methods of evangelism, which some people called **'passive evangelism.'**

We shall not forget the evangelism done by the great **Catechetical School of Alexandria**, which attracted people not only from all Egypt, but also from all over the world. This was so because **evangelism was a passionate desire of its teachers and students alike.** This school followed the evangelism style of St. Paul who occasionally used philosophy and dialogue in his evangelism. **The direct dialogues with the educated of this time won many souls to Christ.** Add to these ingredients, the high level of spiritual life the teachers and students lived,

¹ Tertullian, Apology 50:13, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 3, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. Massachusetts, 1994

² Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho Chapter 110, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. Massachusetts, 1994

which attracted people too.³ **In an educated society, like that of the USA, we need to adapt a similar approach of evangelism.** Sometimes we're afraid of getting into a dialogue with others, when the fact is that a respectful dialogue could be a great way to make others aware of the need for salvation through Jesus Christ.

Christian **evangelism somehow subsided starting from the fourth century** as a result of altering concentration from evangelism to internal heresies and conflicts. There were great fathers and faithful believers who evangelized such as St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Ambrose of Milan. In addition, during this era we witnessed great evangelistic work done in many places, as in Ethiopia led by the Coptic Orthodox Church.

However, generally speaking, **the objective of evangelism was lost in the middle of all the changes that happened in the church at that time.** Sadly to say, becoming closer to the emperor palace, gaining authority, and reaching fame and richness replaced the zeal for others' salvation. The world entered into the church, while the opposite was supposed to happen. The ego of personalities and Churches replaced self-denial and carrying the cross⁴. Being underground church without necessities for centuries was soon replaced by living in richness. Sadly, some cared about their own personal gain and supremacy over others than fulfilling the commandment of evangelism that was given to the Church by the Lord Himself⁵.

The **Fifth century** had witnessed the horrible schism of the church for the first time in history, which was followed by more schisms that left most of the Christian world in a defense position. Each tried to prove the supremacy of his theology, and even to impose it on others, unfortunately, sometimes even by force. In the middle of all of these sad events, **evangelism as an objective was faded dramatically.** One joyful event of the fifth century was **the evangelistic work done by St. Patrick in Ireland**, who came to complete the missionary efforts started earlier by Egyptian monks. Those monks evangelized in Ireland, spread Christianity, established monasteries, and taught monks how to make copies of the classics. The revival of the European Renaissance was based on the classic books saved by those monasteries. So, in a way, we can say that the Copts saved the World civilization.

Islam could not start at a better time, in the **Seventh century**, when Christians were so divided, bitterness badly existed among Christians, and the Roman Empire was on the brink of falling. In my opinion, **Christians forgot the command of evangelism given by the Lord, and instead of spreading the Gospel, they were sadly seeking personal and national pride through the local churches.** The sword of Islam did not only stop evangelism, but also converted masses of people to Islam. A good example for this is the Middle East, where in a short time after Islam invading, Christianity disappeared from Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Arabia, Yemen, and Emirates. Few Christians survived in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. Lebanon and Egypt were the exception; Lebanon was excluded because Christ preached in some of its cities and Egypt because of the blessing of a biblical prophecy⁶, the visit

³ Victor Beshir, *Coptic Roots, Book One*, Chapter "At the Top of the World," talks about the School of Alexandria., 1995

⁴ "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'" Matthew (16:23-25)

⁵ Matt (28:19), Mark (16:15)

⁶ "'Blessed is Egypt My people'" (Isaiah 19:24)

of the Holy Family⁷, and the prayers of millions of Egyptian martyrs. So, Egypt survived the Islamic invasion and continued to have Christians, although with no freedom to evangelize. **Since the Islamic invasion of the Middle East until now, Christian evangelism is prohibited by the power of the state and the mobs.** Therefore, you can say that evangelism was over for those nations except for a few individual cases every now and then⁸. Islam reached Spain and occupied it for about seven hundred years. Without the mercy of God, Islam could have invaded Christian Europe and badly damaged Christianity there.

Later on, we have seen good evangelistic efforts by the **brothers Cyril and Methodios among the Slavic nations in the Ninth Century**. **One excellent reason behind their success is their ability to realize the importance of using the local language**, the language that is spoken and loved by its people. People are dramatically influenced when they see the recognition of their language, which internally means acceptance of the people as equally intelligent and important. **Recognizing the lesson of the importance of local languages and cultures in missionary work is a vital tool in evangelism.** Imposing different languages or cultures on people have usually ended up in flat failure. However, understanding that the essence of Christian faith is not in the language, nor it is in the cultural inheritance of any nation, makes Christianity readily accepted. **We have a great lesson from the evangelism of the Coptic Orthodox in Ethiopia. For when Copts evangelized Ethiopia in the Fourth century, they did not impose on Ethiopians any Coptic ecclesiastical melodies or music. Neither, they imposed on them certain liturgies or the Coptic language or Coptic culture products. The result was significant. The Ethiopian church grew to have its own liturgies (about 15), their own music which expresses the feelings of the Ethiopian person, their own musical instruments, and their own heritage. This is a great lesson we need to learn here in North America to succeed in evangelistic efforts among Americans, Black Americans, and Canadians.**

The eleventh century witnessed **the convert of Russia into Christianity**. The story of its conversion is one of a kind that I love to tell. Prince Vladimir sent his emissaries to discover the true religion. They visited the Muslim Bulgars, the Roman Catholic, and others. Then they attended a liturgy in the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. The men reported back to Vladimir: **"We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth, for surely there is no such splendor or beauty anywhere upon earth. We cannot describe it to you: only this we know, that God dwelt there among men, and that the service surpasses the worship of all other places, for we cannot forget that beauty."**⁹ This story reminds me of similar words mentioned by the liturgist Kenneth Stevenson.¹⁰ He traveled with his father to Jerusalem and visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher during Lent of 1982. After attending many services offered by different denominations, he wrote:

⁷ Matthew (2:13-18)

⁸ Starting in 2003, hundreds of thousands of Muslims from the Middle East were secretly converted to Christianity. Christian evangelism workers used Television and Internet to reach Muslims using revealing the truth about Islam as a tool.

⁹ Luke Alexander Veronis, *Missionaries, Monks And Martyrs: Making Disciples of All Nations*, Page 62, Light and Life Publishing, 1994

¹⁰ Kenneth Stevenson, *"The Liturgical meaning of Holy Week, Jerusalem Revisited,"* Page 100, The Pastoral Press, 1988

'The Copts earned their place in the antiquity of their liturgy and spirituality.'

The lesson of conversion of Russia is the realization of the power of the sacraments of the church. No doubt that **the liturgy is a great evangelistic tool.** However, I have some restrictions based on my own experience; **before inviting people to a liturgy, teach them about the meaning of the Divine Liturgy, what does it involve, and how to pray in it. Then invite them to attend a part of the Divine liturgy in English.** Currently, our Divine Liturgies is too long for Americans and Canadians who got used to only one hour sitting in pews. Even our Divine Liturgies in North America are much longer than those offered in Egypt. I am looking forward to a time when our churches offer more liturgies with a shorter time, in addition to the long ones. This could be accomplished if we can reduce the time spent in taking the Holy Communion—sometimes it takes forty five minutes—and by eliminating the time spent in reading in two languages, preaching in two languages, and in giving lengthy announcements—sometimes announcements take 15 minutes. I personally prefer the practice that was set up by the late Saint Pope Kyrillos, who arranged to have more than one liturgy on a daily basis, and each liturgy would not exceed two hours.

The Eighteen and Nineteen centuries witnessed great efforts in evangelism. An awakening in the evangelistic efforts almost started in all churches, except those who were ruled under Islamic governments. When reading about evangelism during this period, one feels the kindled fire of passionate evangelism in the hearts of tens of thousands who left the luxury of the European life and American life to go to the end of the earth with the torch of the Christian faith. In the process, many died in sea or in the jungles of Africa or at the hands of other religions' leaders. But, death news never stopped the waves of evangelizers, who **left everything and every person they loved behind, with one objective in mind, to transfer the salvation of the cross and the light of the risen Lord to everyone in the world.** Although, the majority of these missions came from the Catholic Church or from Protestants, we have seen a few done by Orthodox Churches. One great example started after the spiritual renaissance of the Russian Orthodox Church towards the end of the 18th Century. **Renewal of monasticism in Mount Athos, which started by translating the book of Philokalia, lead to this evangelistic movement.** Ten monks from the Russian Orthodox Church evangelized in **Alaska.** Tens of thousands were baptized by the close of the 19th century.

However, evangelism of Alaska in history books is always associated with a poor monk named **Herman**, who neither baptized anyone nor translated any books. He turned down the honor of becoming a priest to stay as a humble monk. His great "passive evangelism" was in living a holy life and allowing the light of God to shine through him and thus attracting many to the see the essence of the Christian life. This example shows us **the importance of having Coptic monastic life in America as a tool of passive evangelism. We need monks to show the essence of Christianity through self denial and living an ascetic life similar to the ones lived by the Desert Fathers in Egypt and Palestine.**

Another great effort was done by the monk **Marcarius Gloukharev**, who worked as a missionary worker in **Siberia** for fourteen years. However, his greatest marks on evangelism were in his working hard in formulating an Orthodox theology of missions. **He was also the person who dreamed of instilling a missionary**

consciousness among all Russians and of establishing a missionary center for training missionaries. I myself consider **his dream essential, especially for our Coptic Orthodox Church. We need to instill a missionary consciousness among all Copts.** An understanding of evangelism as an objective set by the Lord himself for the church is very essential for any success in evangelism in our Church. Humbly, I like to share with you that I have the dream of instilling a missionary consciousness among Copts. **I like you also to have this dream too and work toward make it a reality, with the grace of God.**

Another great influence of Gloukharev is his work on **changing the painful reality of the Russian masses at his time. He discovered that they were only superficially Christians, and therefore inadequate for the great evangelistic apostolic task that God had in store for them.** Therefore, he started working first in starting a deep spiritual renewal within the Russian People.

I admire our beloved bishop Youssef, the Coptic bishop of Southern United States, in his recognition of this phenomenon within Copts in America. He talked and wrote about **'the churchless people.'** Indeed, the beginning of any cure is to discover the sickness and to acknowledge it,. Now, it is time for a revival that touches the deepest part of the Coptic souls. May the Lord help our church in dealing with the 'churchless' people's problem.

Question,

There're a few names of individuals and groups mentioned in the lesson. Would you please get more information about one individual or group and submit it to the class. This time we will share all answers among us.