

## “A Journey through the Early Church”—Making Poverty History (3 of 3)

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We’re concluding our series, *“Making Poverty History”* by looking through the lens of history—the history of the Early Church to see the examples they have left us.

We’ve seen God’s heart in the O.T. and God’s heart in the N.T., but today we step out of the Bible and see God’s heart through the lives of the early followers of Jesus. Jesus modeled a life and ministry of “Good News” and “Good Works.” *“This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee, after John began preaching his message of baptism. And you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”* Acts 10:36-38 (NLT) Jesus modeled both “Good News” and “Good Works.” It’s both!

### Today, **LET’S LOOK AT THE EARLY CHURCH**

If we can learn anything from the history of the early church, we can learn that a church without seminaries, church-growth seminars, elaborate programs, Christian politicians, or large buildings can still grow and impact their world at a phenomenal way.

Historically, the church has been found working for change in the least desirable parts of the world. The Church realized that it was vital to the health and well-being of their communities.

The early Christians lived in such a way that caused the world to stand up and take notice! They had a love and a lifestyle that could not be ignored. They were followers of Jesus, and they lived and loved as he did—and when it was time to pay the ultimate price for their love, they willingly laid down their lives for their world.

1st century documents describe an unusual Christian “outreach”: collecting the abandoned dead bodies of society’s outcasts to and giving them a proper burial.

*“Let the strong take care of the weak; let the weak respect the strong. Let the rich man minister to the poor man; let the poor man give thanks to God that he gave him one through whom his need might be satisfied. Let the wise man manifest his wisdom not in words but in good deeds.”* Clement of Rome, 1st Century

*“Widows are not to be neglected. You, after the Lord, be their protector.”* Ignatius, 1st Century

A 2nd Century document describe “baby runs,” wherein Christians collected unwanted babies left out to die of exposure when no one wanted them. That was the old form of Abortion.

Aristides, a Christian writer described Christians to the Roman Emperor Hadrian this way, *“They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother.”*

Aristides, 1st Century

*“And instead of the tithes which the law commanded, the Lord said to divide everything we have with the poor. And he said to love not only our neighbors but also our enemies, and to be givers and sharers not only with the good but also to be liberal givers toward those who take away our possessions.”* Irenaeus, 2nd Century

In approximately A.D. 150, a Christian writer described the lifestyle of the 2nd century Christians. Summing up his thoughts he wrote, *“As the soul is to the body, so Christians are to the world.”* Mathetus, 2nd Century

The Gospel is most powerful when Christians are living in face-to-face relationships with those in our communities. Look at the words of the early Christian Church leader and writer, Tertullian, *“Do we not dwell beside you, sharing your way of life, your dress, your habits and the same needs of life? We are no Brahmins or Indian gymnosophists, dwelling woods and exiled from life. . . We stay beside you in this world, making use of the forum, the provision-market, the bath, the booth, the workshop, the inn, the weekly market, and all other places of commerce. We sail with you, fight at your side, till the soil with you, and traffic with you; we likewise join our technical skill to that of others, and make our works public property for your use.”* Tertullian, 3rd Century The early Christians were not a society of separatists, they were actively engaged in the life

of their city!

The early Church believed that ministering and serving were the normal expression of Christian living. They wanted to serve and bless the city, not control it. They knew that being “*salt and light*” is about influence, not control. They ended up being assets to their cities, not liabilities!

When the horrific plagues of the first three centuries swept over Europe, those who were able fled the cities—but not the Christians. They stayed and ministered to the sick and the dying, whether they were Christian or not. Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, described how believers responded to the plague of A.D. 260: “*The most of our brethren were unsparing in their exceeding love and brotherly kindness. They held fast to each other and visited the sick fearlessly, and ministered to them continually, serving them in Christ. And they died with them most joyfully, taking the affliction of others, and drawing the sickness from their neighbors to themselves and willingly receiving their pains. And many who cared for the sick and gave strength to others died themselves having transferred to themselves their death. . . . But with the heathen everything was quite otherwise. They deserted those who began to be sick, and fled from their dearest friends. And they cast them out into the streets when they were half dead, and left the dead like refuse, unburied.*” Dionysius, 3rd Century

The early Christians ministered to and showed hospitality toward the poor, the orphans, the elderly, the sick, the mine-workers, and the prisoners. “*The evidence of the Christians’ zeal and piety was made clear to all the pagans. For example, they alone in such a catastrophic state of affairs gave practical evidence of their sympathy and philanthropy by works. All day long some of them would diligently persevere in performing the last offices for the dying and burying them (for there were countless numbers, and no one to look after them). While others gathered together in a single assemblage all who were afflicted by famine throughout the whole city, and would distribute bread to them all.*” Eusebius, 4th Century

The Roman Emperor Julian, one of the chief persecutors of Christians, admitted in disgust that: “*These godless Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours also; welcoming them into their table. Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious errors. See their love-feasts, and their tables spread for the indigent. Such practice is common among them, and causes a contempt for our gods.*” Roman Emperor Julian, 4th Century

The early Christians said that if a child starves while a Christian has extra food, then the Christian is guilty of murder. One of the early Church Fathers wrote this, “*When someone strips a man of his clothes, we call him a thief. And one who might clothe the naked and does not—should not he be given the same name? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat in your wardrobe belongs to the naked; the shoes you let rot belong to the barefoot; the money in your vaults belongs to the destitute.*” Basil, 4th Century

Throughout the centuries the Church has played a major role in transforming communities and leading the way in social justice and equality.

—St. Patrick not only Christianized Ireland, he led the charge to end slavery in Ireland.

—John Wesley not only led revivals, he campaigned for prison and labor reform, built orphanages and schools, battled the slave trade, set up loans for the poor and gave away his money to the people in need.

—William Wilberforce pushed to abolish slavery in the British Colonies—and won in 1807!

—William and Catherine Booth began the Salvation Army in 1865. This was written,

*“Probably during no hundred years in the history of the world have their been saved so many thieves, gamblers, drunkards, and prostitutes as during the past quarter of a century through the Salvation Army.”*

—Christians have been at the front of establishing child-labor laws, schools, universities, orphanages, hospitals, aiding in famine relief, and rescue missions.

They were not only concerned about saving “souls” but about saving “bodies” as well!

They were not only concerned about getting people to heaven, but making a difference now!

***The Church is the only organization that exists for the benefits of its non-members!!!***

If Sunrise Church ceased to exist, how would the city feel? Would our city weep? Would anybody even notice? Would anybody

care? Our mission: **Making the Intangible God Tangible!**

*“You see, we don’t go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, ‘Let there be light in the darkness,’ has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.*

*“We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.” 2 Corinthians 4:5-7 (NLT)* It’s not about us, it’s about God. That’s what the world needs to see!

Riding a donkey, Jesus entered into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The crowds cheered and shouted out praises to him. They cut off the palm branches and laid them down on the ground for the donkey to ride on. Some even threw down their coats and shouted praises to God.

Now, what if the donkey had thought it was all about him? After all, he was the one doing the work! But it wasn’t about him, he was just a donkey carrying the Message of God.

The church that serves it’s community is just the donkey. We are simply carrying the message!

Mother Teresa said it like this: *“I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world.”*

**SO WHAT ARE WE GOING TO BE DOING ABOUT IT? (*Putting your faith into action*)**

We are his witnesses: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8 (NLT)*

**The Sonrise “4-H” Initiative: Hunger, Homelessness, Hispanic Ministries & HIV/AIDS**

***Twelve Sonrise Examples—Small Things Done with Great Love Will Change the World***

We need to be like Jesus. Like Jesus, we need to be out in our communities connecting with people through acts of *God’s amazing love* and connecting them to a *God of amazing Grace!*

Our world is still open to a gospel it can hear *and* see. The real gospel is two-sided—it’s truth and *proof!* Church history tells us the Church has always been at its best when it’s Gospel comes with both sides: grace and truth!

One of the most effective ways to reach people with the message of Jesus Christ today is through real and relevant acts of service. To *tell* the truth, we must *show* the truth. After all, it’s the model that Jesus used! He served, he met needs...and people listened!

Mosaic pastor, Erwin McManus wrote, *“There is something mystical about servanthood because God is a servant. When we serve others, we more fully reflect the image of God, and our hearts begin to resonate with the heart of God. We may never be more like God than when we’re serving from a purely selfless motivation.”*

My son, Josiah, has “show and tell” every few weeks at his Kindergarten class. Remember that? It seems that the Church has become more concerned with “telling” than with “showing.”

–Christians will tell others what they need to do to be right with God.

–Christians will preach about what is not right with the world.

–But most Christians have forgotten how to show God’s love to the world.

–For the most part, what we “show” doesn’t match up with what we “tell.”

In this day and age, whether we like it or not, we have to earn the right to be heard!

We have a chance to build relational bridges with *“the least, the last and the lost”* so that they can “see” Jesus in us and so that we can share God’s grace in the midst of real need.

***We can’t do everything, but we can all do something!***