

## **This Can Be the Church's Moment**

### **By Bob Young**

Sociologist Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, studied the unexpected success of the church during the first three centuries of its existence. How did the church survive? In the midst of persecution, how did it become the dominant faith of the Roman Empire? How does one explain the exponential growth of the church?

From AD 30 to AD 311, fifty-four emperors ruled the Empire. Only about a few sought to persecute the Christians. Not until Decius (249–251) was there an Empire-wide persecution. Emperors involved in some kind of persecution against the church include Claudius (41-54), Nero (54-68), Domitian (81-96), Trajan (98-117), Severus (193-211), Decius (249-251), Valerian (253-260), and Diocletian (284-305). Nero's animosity toward the Christians is generally well-known, and Domitian may be the emperor referred to in the book of Revelation, but Decius led the first empire-wide persecution.

A quick look at the church during the first three centuries shows that they did not have church buildings, organization, or big-name preachers. They led lives that distinguished them from the surrounding culture, they were characterized by caring for the sick and needy (Christians started the first Meals on Wheels as they fed more than 1500 of the hungry and destitute in Rome every day), and they were people of prayer. Emperor Julian, known as the Apostate, an opponent of the faith, said that Christianity *"has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care of the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the [Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them."*

Stark argues that the success of Christianity can be attributed to several factors: the popularity of Christianity among the middle and upper classes, its presence and strength in the cities, its beliefs about the worth of human life, its focus on human dignity, its response to pandemics, and its pacifism.

Most of these factors must be pushed to one side to focus on why the present time can be a defining moment for the church. Before we consider the possibilities before the church today, we must review the church's response to pandemics in the first and second centuries.

### **Church History: The Church's Defining Moment**

The early Christians valued life, prohibiting abortion and infanticide. Women were highly valued in comparison to the surrounding culture, resulting in the conversion of many women. During pandemics, when others fled the cities, Christians stayed to minister and care for the sick and needy. During two major pandemics in the second and third centuries Christians not only served non-Christians, they also shared how the gospel provided an explanation of bad things happening to innocent people. When Christians died, the remaining Christians formed new friendships that accelerated the spread of the gospel.

The **Antonine Plague** of AD 165-180, also known as the **Plague of Galen** (from the name of the Greek physician who described it), was a pandemic brought to the Roman Empire by troops returning from the Near East. After nine years, the disease broke out again causing up to 2000 deaths a day in Rome. The total deaths have been estimated at 5 million. The disease killed as much as one-third of the population in some areas. A quotation from this time: "The Christian faith made life meaningful even amid sudden and surprising death."

The **Plague of Cyprian** started in Ethiopia around Easter in AD 250. It reached Rome the following year and eventually spread to Greece and Syria. The plague lasted almost 20 years and at its height killed as many as 5000 people per day in Rome. As Christians ministered to those in need, they offered explanation and comfort. The teachings of the Christians explained the actions of the Christians, causing those teachings to be accepted.

During these pandemics, non-Christians were greatly impacted by how the Christians responded to chaos. They saw hope in the darkness. The Christians lived out their belief system practically, ministering to those in need and building community and connections through those contacts.

### **The Twenty-first Century: The Church's Defining Moment?**

The question before us, "Will this be the church's defining moment?" Will the church's response in this time be so significant that church history will remember? How will the church respond? In many cases, the institutional church no longer provides a model for genuine community. Therefore, it has difficulty knowing and addressing the needs of individuals, especially of those outside the church.

The early Christians responded to the needs around them with the gospel. Not only did the gospel motivate them to minister to the sick and needy, the power of the gospel in their own lives caused them to explain their actions and their hope. They shared the message of the gospel as they shared the ministry motivated by the gospel. The ministry of reconciliation for the soul was done alongside the ministry of healing for the body. Spiritual cure and physical care were connected.

Look at the world in which we live! Technology has made connections accessible to anyone anywhere at any time. The current pandemic is causing people to look for answers, to grasp opportunities for community and sharing. As Paul wrote almost 2000 years ago, Jesus is still the answer. Jesus is God's yes!

The church must avoid the tendency to look inward and care primarily for itself. The church must avoid the tendency to be satisfied with what has already been accomplished. The church must focus afresh on its responsibility to share the gospel! If history is to look back on this moment and say that the church seized the moment, the church must renew and redouble its efforts to share the gospel.

In a time when physical community is difficult or impossible, technology provide connections that reorient life. Christians around the world are creatively sharing community and sharing the gospel: Bible studies by phone, a digital evangelism campaign in the Dominican Republic has reached over 170,000 people and generated hundreds of contacts from people interested in the gospel, evangelistic Bible studies using technology—dozens of options are available on our cell phones and computers.

It is time for bold planning and bold action. It is time to look outside ourselves and our little circle. May God's church rise up and make this a day when the gospel is sounding forth to unbelievers and struggling Christians as never before. May the message of the church at this time be the Good News of Jesus. May the ministry of the church be for all – especially for those who are seeking connections and community in times of isolation and social distancing.

May the church see the opportunity, the resources, and the need. We live at a time in history that may become the church's defining moment! What will history report? The church seized the moment? Or, the church squandered the moment? You and I will decide.