

The Future of Christianity in the West – #9

This is the ninth of nine articles in a series entitled “The Future of Christianity in the West.”

Princeton University professor Robert P. George, writing in *Touchtone* magazine, highlights the conflict with the world that Christians today face. He writes,

The biblical and natural-law conception as marriage as *conjugal*, that is, as the one-flesh union of sexually complementary spouses, is not only “alien” to secular progressives, who understand “marriage” merely as a form of sexual-romantic companionship or domestic partnership, but nearly incomprehensible — except, that is, as what they suppose is a form of bigotry against people who are attracted to and wish to marry (as progressives understand the term) people of their same sex.¹

He cites the growing evidence that the winners of the culture wars, dominant in the elite sectors of our society (i.e. education, news and entertainment media, the professions, in the corporate world, and even a substantial numbers of religious institutions), are taking an increasingly hard line. They are in no mood for accommodating religious traditionalists. They are demanding conformity with the requirements of the sexual revolution.

George doubts that Rod Dreher’s strategy of “strategic retreat” from society in order to strengthen Christian institutions (churches, schools, families, enterprises) will work. He says ominously, “The progressives will hunt us down and dismantle our institutions.” The cost of discipleship is getting heavier. “The days of comfortable Christianity,” he warns, “are over.”²

The alternative to *flight* is the same at that which the Christian community has always faced: *fight*. George adds to Dreher’s wise counsel by arguing that by God’s grace, we must continue “to boldly bear witness to truths that are unpopular among those controlling the levers of cultural, political, and economic power.”³ God’s grace is sufficient for the task. “So, shall we flee from the battle?” he asks. “No. Quite the opposite. Onward, Christian soldiers.”⁴ Will such a strategy succeed? History affords some hope.

Hope from the past

Sociologist Rodney Stark estimates that there were under 8000 Christians in a Roman Empire of 60 million by the year 100. Yet he points out that if the church grew at a not unreasonable rate of 40% per decade (under 4%/year), there would be over 217,000 Christians by the year 200, nearly 6.2 million by the year 300, and an astonishing 33.8 million by the year 350, or over 56% of the population of the entire Empire. Some early Christian writers by that time were indeed claiming that Christians were a majority, leading Stark to say that “Constantine’s conversion,” often credited with the growth of the church, “would better be seen as a response to the massive exponential wave in progress, not as its cause.”⁵ He reckons that this extraordinary progress

¹ Robert P. George, “The Pagan Public Square,” *Touchtone* magazine, May/June 2020, 26.

² *Ibid.*, 27.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 10.

occurred through gradual, steady, long-term growth. It occurred mainly by converts introducing their family members to the Christian religion. Conversion proceeded “along social networks formed by interpersonal attachments.”⁶ Taking a fairly unconventional approach and setting aside supernatural explanations for the moment, Stark provides three sociological reasons for the growth of early Christianity.

Epidemics and care

First, Christianity was able better to cope with the devastating epidemics that struck the Roman Empire in 165 A.D. and again in 251 A.D. The first of these is estimated to have reduced the population by from a quarter to one third. Christianity was able to explain epidemics as divine testing designed to strengthen faith, whereas pagans merely were terror-struck. Christians responded by lovingly caring for the afflicted, resulting in higher survival rates among Christians. Pagans abandoned and fled from the infected, hastening their demise. Elementary care such as food and water greatly reduced mortality rates among Christians. Their ethics of love and care had no parallels in pagan religions. This also led to conversions to Christianity and pagans could not but help notice with admiration, “Oh how they love one another.”

Status of women

Second, women enjoyed a higher status in Christian circles than in the larger Greco-Roman world. For example, Athenian wives typically were married at puberty if not before. Legally they were classified as children. They were not allowed to own property and were themselves the legal property of a man (e.g. father, husband or brother) their entire lives. Their husbands could divorce them simply by ordering them out of the house. Their security was always in jeopardy. Christian women, however, were protected by the church’s strong prohibition of divorce. They were married at an older age and had a voice in whom they would marry.

Their higher status is related further to Christianity prohibiting infanticide and abortion. Exposure of live infants, particularly deformed males and unwanted girls, was legal, widespread, and morally acceptable, even endorsed by Plato and Aristotle.⁷ Stark cites a letter from the 1st century A.D. from an out-of-town husband to his wife soon to give birth: “If it’s a boy keep it, if a girl discard it.”⁸

Abortion was a major cause of death among women. By prohibiting infanticide and abortion, Christians helped correct the gender imbalance (more boys than girls) of the Greco-Roman world. Christian women didn’t die from botched abortions because Christians didn’t abort babies. This meant there would be more wives, more babies, and more Christians. Naturally enough, Christianity was especially successful at attracting women, particularly in the upper classes.

Marriage

Third, closely associated with the status of women, Christian *fertility* rates played a vital role in the growth of the early church as well. Historians cite evidence of birth rates below replacement in the Greco-Roman world. Marriage was held in low esteem among men, many of whom attributed avoiding marriage due to the difficulty of dealing with wives.⁹ Male prostitution,

⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁷ Ibid., 97ff; 118ff.

⁸ Ibid., 97, 98.

⁹ Ibid., 117.

bisexuality, and homosexuality were widespread, contributing to the decline in birth rates among pagans. So also did infanticide and abortion, the latter as noted, often rendering women infertile and even killing them. Various methods of birth control were utilized and sexual deviancies practiced throughout the Roman Empire to avoid conception.¹⁰ All this contributed to a declining pagan population.

Over against this, Christians celebrated fertility. They sought to fulfill the command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). They taught that the primary purpose of sex was procreation. Again, they prohibited infanticide and abortion as murder. They prohibited prostitution, homosexuality, bisexuality, and non-reproductive sexual acts. Consequently, Christian fertility rates surged. Christians out-reproduced their pagan neighbors. They sought to have children, celebrated their arrival, and avoided practices that would have prevented conception. Christian men and women cherished marriage, cherished family, and cherished children. Dreher writes: “Christianity... worked a cultural revolution, restraining and channeling male eros, elevating the status of women and of the human body, and infusing marriage – and marital sexuality – with love.” He cites Sarah Ryden’s work, *Paul Among the People*, who writes that Christian marriage was “as different from anything before or since as the command to turn the other cheek.”¹¹ “Superior fertility,” Stark affirms with understatement, was “a nontrivial portion of Christian growth” in the early centuries.¹²

Doctrine

The Christian victory wasn’t all sociology. The way Christians lived can only be explained by Christian convictions. Christian doctrines played a foundational role on the sociological outcomes. “Central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations,” Stark maintains.¹³ Evidence from ancient cemetery inscriptions indicates that Christians lived longer than their pagan contemporaries. Why? Because they avoided excesses – moderation was deemed a virtue and so they avoided drunkenness and gluttony and promiscuity. They lived healthier lives. They also belonged to a community in which they cared for each other.

Why did they live as they did? Because of Christianity’s distinctive doctrines. Like what? Like “God is love.” Because God is love, Christians understood that they were to love each other. The ancient world “regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions – defects of character,” unworthy of the wise and found only in the unenlightened, Stark reminds us.¹⁴ Any other doctrinal factors? Yes – the sanctity of human life made in the image of God. Remember this was a world in which life was cheap. For entertainment people went to arenas to watch wild animals tear men apart or to watch men hack each other to death. This was their spectator sport. “It is difficult to comprehend the emotional life of such people,” says Stark.¹⁵ Where Christians had the power and influence to do so, they prohibited such “games.”

The early church grew because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the empowered Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the courage of the early Christians. The shocking reality is that it also grew

¹⁰ Ibid., 121, 122.

¹¹ Dreher, *Benedict Option*, 199.

¹² Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 128.

¹³ Stark, 211.

¹⁴ Stark, 212.

¹⁵ Star, 214.

because Christians simply out-lived, out-loved, and out-(re)produced their pagan neighbors. It took 300 years. Yet after 300 years, Christians were a majority. Why? Because they were pro-life, pro-family, pro-marriage, pro-children in a classical culture that was addicted to pleasure and (ironically) death. This is why our strategy must be that of the marathon and not the sprint. The immediate future looks bleak. The long term: Jesus shall reign.

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