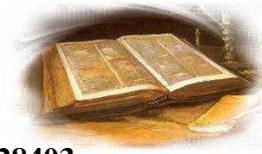


# The Examiner



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## Why The Early Church Grew - By Mike Willis

Each of us has been impressed with the rapid growth of the early church. Three thousand were baptized on Pentecost (**Acts 2:41**). In a short time the number of the men was 5000 (**Acts 4:4**). Later Luke records that "multitudes both of men and women" were "added to the Lord" (**Acts 5:14**). Within his lifetime, Paul could testify that the gospel had been taken to all nations of the earth (**Col. 1:23**).

What were the causes of the gospel spreading so rapidly? I am sure that most of us have our own ideas about why that happened. The eminent historian, **Edward Gibbon**, gave his assessment of five reasons for the growth of the early church saying: I. The inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians derived it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses. II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth. III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. IV. The pure and austere morals of the

Christians. V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman empire (**Decline and Fall of the Romans Empire I:348 [Modem Library Edition, 1995]**).

**Let's consider his list one by one.**

### **1. The Intolerance of the Church.**

The early church saw itself as teaching the only means of salvation. There was no other name under heaven among men by which men could be saved (**Acts 4:12**). Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life; no one came to the Father but by him (**John 14:6**). Those who disbelieved the gospel would be damned (**Mark 16:16**). Not only were the Christians teaching that there is only one way to be saved, they were unwilling to bend even in the least to compromise with idolatry. "It was the universal sentiment both of the church and of heretics that the daemons were the authors, the patrons, and the objects of idolatry" (**pg 357**). When he was asked to sprinkle a few grains of incense to Caesar as God, the Christian refused. "The most trifling mark of respect to the national

worship he considered as a direct homage yielded to the daemon, and as an act of rebellion against the majesty of God" (**pg 358**). Hence, the Christian considered it his arduous duty to preserve himself pure from idolatry in every form of its expression. His everyday life was threatened by idolatry. The Christian, who with pious honor avoided the abomination of the circus or the theater, found himself encompassed with infernal snares in every convivial entertainment, as often as his friends, invoking the hospitable deities, poured out libations to each other's happiness. When the bride, struggling with well-affected reluctance, was forced in hymnal pomp over the thresh-old of her new habitation, or when the sad procession of the dead slowly moved towards the funeral pile; the Christian, on these interesting occasions, was compelled to desert the persons who were dearest to him, rather than contract the guilt inherent to those impious ceremonies (**pg 358-359**).

Faithful Christians did not yield to these expressions of idolatry and they condemned those weak Christians who did. One might expect an historian to list this intolerance as something that restrained the growth of Christianity, but Gibbon identified this as one of the reasons that Christianity spread so rapidly. Every time the Christian refused participation in some idolatrous practice, he had an opportunity to

proclaim his faith in Christ. First century Christians were in a life and death struggle with idolatry; their very intolerance is what helped achieve the victory.

### **2. Their belief in the after life.**

Christianity was preached in a culture that had limited knowledge of and belief in the world to come. Judaism was divided between the Pharisees and Sadducees about whether or not there was a bodily resurrection. The enlightened Gentiles viewed the body as inherently evil and death freed the spirit from the bodily prison house. The soul was released and became one with the Eternal Spirit. Christianity announced with clarity its fundamental belief about the resurrection of the body, judgment, and heaven and hell. It brought life and immortality to light through the gospel (**2 Tim. 1:10**). Paul's teaching in **1 Corinthians 15** about the resurrection of the body was in conflict with both the Sadducees and contemporary pagan thought. The Christian's hope of the resurrection of the body from the dead and entrance into heaven brought hope in the midst of despair. It was a message readily received by people with-out hope.

**3. The supernatural gifts.** The miracles of the gospel separated Christianity from all other religions of the world. When the miracles of the apostles were placed beside the deceitful arts of the magicians, men could easily detect the difference (see Philip's miracles versus Simon the sorcerer, **Acts 8:1-12**). Jesus began

his ministry with the miracle at Cana of Galilee and gave abundant demonstrable proof that he was the Messiah. He healed the sick, restored sight to the blind, enabled the lame to walk, and even raised the dead. He walked on water, multiplied the loaves and fish, and calmed the sea. He knew what was in the heart of man, events that occurred with reference to which he had no earthly means of gaining information, and otherwise demonstrated his divine omniscience. This is one of the things that created belief. John wrote, "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not writ-ten in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (**John 20:30-31**). When the apostles went forth preaching, their words were confirmed by miracles as well (**Mark 16:15-20; Heb. 2:3-4**). These miracles distinguished the gospel message from that of Jews and pagans alike, giving men reason to believe the gospel message.

**4. Their godly virtues.** The early Christians lived a life of moral purity, which showed in their own lives how the gospel can transform sinners. When Pliny the governor wrote to the Emperor Trajan concerning the persecution of Christians, he said, They affirmed that the whole of their fault, or error, lay in this, that they were wont to meet together on a stated day before it was light and sing

among themselves, alternately, a hymn to Christ, as God, and bind them-selves by an oath, not to the commission of any wickedness, but not to be guilty of theft, or robbery, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor to deny a pledge committed to them when called upon to return it. When these things were performed it was their custom to separate, and then to come together again to a meal, which they ate in common without any disorder (quoted by H.W. Everest in *The Divine Demonstration* pg 83). When one reads the moral teachings of the New Testament, he is impressed with how its teaching set Christians apart from the world. Paul wrote, Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (**Gal. 5:19-21**).

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified

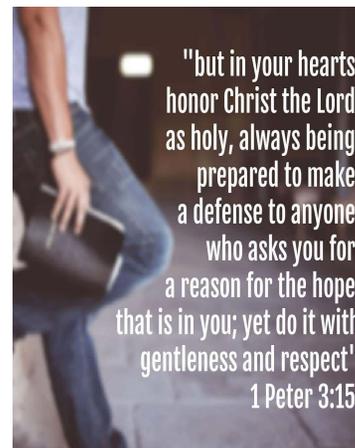
in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God (**1 Cor. 6:9-11**). In an age when the darkness of sin was so bad that pagan philosophers wanted to protect the youth from the influence of the gods, Christianity was a light that called for moral purity and commitment from its adherents. Some brethren think that preaching on moral issues will drive away potential converts, but Gibbon thought that the appeal of moral purity to consciences floundering in darkness was one of the things that caused the church to grow.

**5. The union and discipline of the church.** The church was organized during the first century. It had elders or bishops overseeing each local church. These shepherds oversaw the flock of God which was among them. Each local church was an independent republic existing within the Roman empire. Its members obeyed a higher authority than the local governor or Caesar himself. They were subject to the God of heaven. His laws were executed under the administrative oversight of bishops or elders. The church was served by its deacons so that its work was accomplished in a timely fashion. The local church was not something that needed to be abolished or repaired so that church growth could occur. As the church came from the hand of God, it was fully capable of doing the great work God gave it to accomplish. Gibbon saw the local church as one of the things that contributed to the spread of Christianity.

### Conclusion

What is amazing is that some of the very things that caused the church to grow in the first century are the things under attack in the twentieth century. Some condemn the church for being intolerant; others equate the miracles of Christ and his apostles with the pseudo-miracles of pagan-ism; some have decided that belief in heaven is a childish belief in a pie-in-the-sky in the sweet bye and bye that must be replaced with a social activism that creates its heaven on earth now; others wish to eliminate from preaching any call for such strict ethics as condemnation of the lottery, social drinking, lasciviousness (dancing,

pornography, and such like things), immodest dress, fornication, homosexuality, and such like things; and some wish to diminish the local church by emphasizing that we need to be preaching Christ instead of the church. The very things they wish to change are the things that Gibbon saw as contributing to the rapid growth of the church! Without regard to what Gibbon or anyone else has said, we need faithfully to proclaim God's word and trust him to give the increase. He will bless those who walk in obedience to him. --- **Via Guardian of Truth XLI: 19 p. 2, October 2, 1997**



"but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect"  
1 Peter 3:15