

The First Followers of Jesus

You may have heard the word *evangelism*. What does the word mean, and who were the first evangelists? What connection do their lives and legacies have on Christian evangelism and missionaries today?

Jesus's first followers were his disciples, and they also became the first evangelists. According to the New Testament of the Christian Bible, Jesus told them "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." That meant that he wanted them to evangelize, or preach the Gospel, to the people of the world.



The four written Gospels are the first four books of the New Testament. According to tradition, two were written by disciples of Jesus - Matthew and John - while the other two were written by followers of St. Paul - Mark and Luke. Each of these books evangelizes by telling the story of the life and ministry of Jesus. The books were meant for sharing with people in order to teach about Jesus. By learning about Jesus, people could then become followers of the new faith.

When early Christians started evangelizing their beliefs, they faced strong opposition from other people. They first began to preach about Jesus to the Jews of Jerusalem. The response was swift and negative. The Christians faced rejection and persecution, or harsh treatment because of their beliefs. Some were even thrown out of the city.

Paul

One of the great persecutors of early Christians eventually changed his mind and became one of the greatest of Christian evangelists. Paul (also sometimes called Saul) was born into a Jewish family in Tarsus, what is now Turkey, around 3 CE. As a student of Jewish law, he became convinced that Christianity was in violation of that law and thought it should be destroyed.

According to accounts in the Bible, one day, as Paul rode along the road to Damascus, he had a vision from God and was struck blind for three days. This vision changed his mind. He claimed that God had called him to be both a

Christian and an evangelist for the faith. He immediately committed his life to spreading Jesus's teachings. He thought that the new faith of Christianity was God's gospel to the entire world and felt that he was called to preach to the non-Jewish community.

Paul's evangelizing journeys were among the first Christian missions, which is where we get the word *missionary*. A missionary is a person sent to a foreign land to promote Christianity. Paul traveled all over the Mediterranean region, trying to reach areas where no Christian evangelists had yet gone. He even planned to travel as far as Spain. He also often wrote letters to others detailing his views. Paul's preaching is recorded in several New Testament books. He was arrested in Jerusalem around 57 CE and again in 67 CE. He wrote his last letters around 67 or 68 CE and then was likely executed.

Paul was probably the best known evangelist, but he was not the only one. Many missionaries continued Paul's work, and by 130 CE there were Christian churches throughout Asia Minor, Egypt, Greece, and Italy. Although the persecution of Christians continued, things changed dramatically in 313 CE. At this time, Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. From that point, the faith spread as part of the "Romanization" of the Empire. In other words, as the Roman Empire grew larger, Christianity also spread to more places.

The Further Spreading of the Faith

By the 1200s Christianity had become the predominant, or strongest, faith in Europe, spread by missionaries and by conquering armies. Beginning in the 1400s, it was carried to the New World by the European explorers. Christian missionaries also traveled into Asia, spreading the Gospel and searching for converts.

International Christian missionary work reached its peak in the 1800s. At that time, Christian missionaries were often part of new colonies; they helped spread both their religion and the political system of the colony.

In the United States, missionary work was closely linked to what is called the evangelical movement in Christianity. That movement



American Protestant missionaries in Fuzhou, China, around 1890

reflected the religious fervor of the Great Awakening. Many American Christians believed they were called by God to be “born again” into their faith. They recommitted themselves to Jesus and to spreading the faith throughout the world. Many became missionaries, and many chose to evangelize in Asia and Africa.

Evangelism and Missionaries Today

In the United States today, most Christian denominations (branches of Christianity) continue to spread the Gospel through missionaries. Some missionaries are sent outside of the country, and some preach to and seek converts among the American people. Nearly all Christian denominations, including the Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, Baptist, and Nazarene Churches, support international missions. However, there is evidence that Christian evangelism and missionary work are changing.

Evangelizing may be changing because the old methods may not be effective at increasing the number of Christians. In fact, it has been reported that the number of Christians as a percentage of the world’s population has actually dropped. In 1900 34 percent of the world’s population identified as Christian, but in the year 2000, that number was 33 percent. For many Christians this has brought about a rethinking of the meaning and purpose of evangelism and mission work.

This trend has created a different approach and goal for missionaries. Some are looking for a ways that people of different faiths can better understand one another. They are also trying to move away from politics. Other missionaries are working hard to make a difference in the lives of others by helping to build homes and schools. Many modern missionaries are less concerned with gaining a political advantage in an area and more concerned with creating connections among different people.

Some scholars who study religion have also noted this change. Professor Dana Robert, director of Boston University’s Center for Global Christianity and Mission, agrees that missionaries have changed their approach. She cited a joint statement made by the Catholic Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance in 2011. This statement stressed the importance of accepting, rather than trying to change, the faith of other people. This approach, one of acceptance, can help people find things in common with one another, which is an important step in understand differences. There are also many more Christian missionaries coming from outside the United States and Europe. Many of these non-Western missionaries are the ones who are now working in developing nations. In 1973 there were about 3,400 non-Western

missionaries in the world. Today, there are more than 100,000. That is close to the total number of Protestant missionaries from the United States and Canada. This presents important questions for Christian leaders around the world. Do the national and cultural backgrounds of missionaries make a difference in what he or she is trying to accomplish? Is their message any different from the one that Paul preached 2,000 years ago? These are questions that people from all over the world, and from every sect within Christianity, will continue to discuss for years to come.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. What does the word *evangelize* mean?
 - A. to help fellow Christians
 - B. to worship God
 - C. to behave like Jesus
 - D. to spread the word of the Gospel
2. What happened in 313 CE that changed Christian evangelism?
 - A. Paul was executed.
 - B. The New Testament was published.
 - C. The Catholic Church was established.
 - D. The Roman Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion.
3. Which of the following statements is a fact that has led people to question how effective missionary work is?
 - A. Missionary work is very fulfilling and challenging.
 - B. By the year 2000, a smaller percentage of the population identified as Christian than in the year 1900.
 - C. Missionaries today should be more concerned with finding things in common with one another than with pointing out differences.
 - D. Because missionary work has been around for a long time, it will likely continue into the future.
4. In what ways have Christian evangelism and missionary work changed since the days of early Christianity? Do you think Christian evangelism will continue to change as the time moves forward? Provide details from the passage to support your answer.