

May 12, 2013

# *A Gospel Centered Community*

## *Save Yourselves From This Crooked Generation*

### **Acts 2:40**

When historians tackle the question of why Christianity, alone of all the religions and spiritual movements of that day, and there were hundreds all competing for disciples, conquered the entire Roman Empire in such short order, they really don't have any answers that satisfy. What they do have are causes that raise more questions than they answer. When they look at the rise of Christianity and its dominance over all the other philosophies and beliefs and mystery religions of the day, they try to ascribe the success of Christianity in terms of the effects of Christianity. And there were three outstanding characteristics historians see as contributing to the success of Christianity.

First of all they said, **Christians died better than everyone else.** The Christians didn't fear death the way everyone else did. They were covered with pitch and strapped to poles and lit on fires like tiki torches; they were thrown into the arena and lions and tigers and clawed and ripped them to shreds; they were sewn into the skin of bulls and given to the wild animals to tear into. And in all of this, the remarkable thing was the way they died. They died praying and singing and praising God. They didn't die like everyone else. Death seemed to hold no fear for them. And so one of the reasons Christianity spread so fast and far is that no one had ever seen anyone die like that, they'd never seen any religion offer that kind of peace.

The second explanation is that **Christians were more inclusive than everybody else.** Every other religion of the day was exclusive – not inclusive. It appealed to the poor as well as the rich. The high-born as well as the low born. It appealed to the intellectual as well as the ignoramus. It didn't make distinctions between well-born and base-born. In Acts we read that there were slaves as well as nobility that became Christians – and everybody in between. And everywhere that Christianity spread, the status of women always rose. In that world, women were second class citizens – they had very little authority or say at home or in public. In a court of law, a woman's word was worth less than a slave. But everywhere the gospel went, the status of women rose. Pagans were scandalized by the way Christianity valued women. The reason Paul and Peter had to write to the churches on how to honor your wife was precisely because the culture they came from devalued women so much.

The third reason given for the success of Christianity was that **they cared better than everyone.** Emperor Julian wrote a letter to a friend complaining that they couldn't stop these Christians because they cared better than everyone else. He noted that the 'Jews care for the Jews, the Greeks care for the Greeks, the Romans care for the Romans, but the Christians care for everyone'. He was offended that Christians cared not only for their own but for everyone else. *'For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans [Christians] support our poor in addition to their own'*. When plagues hit the cities, as they so often did during those times, it was the Christians who stayed in the cities to care for the sick and bury the dead – everybody else just got out of Dodge. It was the Christians who began hospitals and organized care for the sick. It was Christians who were out in little boats on the Tiber river rescuing the infants that were thrown in to drown, Roman birth control at work. In the third century, a converted prostitute named Afra developed a ministry to abandoned children of prisoners, thieves, smugglers, pirates, and runaway slaves. Christians cared better than anybody else.

So historians attribute the success of Christianity to the effects of Christianity – but they admit that that doesn't really answer the question – Why did they die better than everyone? Why did we were they more inclusive than everyone? Why did they care better than everyone? Kenneth Scott Latourette, one of the best church historians, comes the closest to the real explanation: *"The more one examines the various factors which seem to account for the extraordinary victory of Christianity, the more one is driven to search for a cause underlying them all. It is clear that at the very beginning of Christianity there must have occurred a vast release of energy virtually unequalled in history. Without it the future course of religion is inexplicable."*

Of course as a respected historian who deals in facts and empirical data, Latourette doesn't try to identify this vast release of energy, but we know what it was – it was the release of the power of the Holy Spirit – the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh that Peter says in this message that the prophet Joel predicted. And we understand that when the Spirit of God is poured out, **there is an overpowering appearance of the manifest presence of God; there is the spontaneous declaration of His greatness and power; and there is the effective proclamation of the gospel.** But there is also something else that happens when the Spirit is poured out. **A new generation** is born, a new people. There is a dynamic and fundamental change in the way people live their lives. A new generation, a new community, is born that looks different than the culture around it – a new community that lives differently, talks differently, thinks differently, has different standards and values than everybody around. When the word of God by the Spirit of God pierces the hearts of people, it not only brings conviction, repentance and salvation – it ushers them into a brand new community – a new generation.

When Peter, with many other words, exhorts the crowd to **"Save yourselves from this crooked generation."**, he is not just calling them to believe in Jesus as their personal Savior – although that is where it all starts. He's not just calling them to repent of a sinful life – although that is absolutely necessary. He's not even saying that this is a particularly bad generation, as generations go – after all, he's primarily preaching to religious people here. And there have been plenty worse generations before and after that. One in particular was so bad that God destroyed the earth with a flood because of it. No, what Peter was saying was much more profound, much deeper than simply a personal call to salvation.

When we see 'crooked generation' we tend to think in terms of general dishonesty, a kind of general sinfulness – as in 'He's a crooked politician' which is redundant. In fact if you look at various translations you'll get variations on that theme. The word here is **scolios** – from which we get our word scoliosis. And it really means malformed, corrupt, even disintegrating. It has the connotations of something malignant, something maimed, something that is falling apart. And Peter says 'Repent and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and save yourselves from this generation that is malformed, corrupt, and falling apart'.

The word 'save' here, **sozo**, means to rescue from danger or destruction and carries with it the idea of saving someone suffering from disease – making them well, restoring them to health. In other words, Peter saw these guys as belonging to a generation that was malformed and corrupt and needed to be saved, healed, restored to wholeness. What Peter is speaking to is the fact that we are living in a world that is literally falling apart. Everything's falling apart. At some point in time, the universe exploded into existence by the word of God – and He didn't create it to fall apart. But since the Fall and the entrance of sin, all creation has been subjected to decay and it is running down like an unwound watch. The word of God tells us this, science tells us this, our bodies tell us this. Life is like a Bell curve. When you're young, all you can see is the upside – but there comes a day when all you can see is the steep and slippery slope to the bottom. And you realize that everything is falling apart.

Science tells us that things in this universe tend toward disorder and chaos – not order. Nothing left to itself improves itself over time. Everything disintegrates and falls apart. Not just material things but our human connections too. Unless you are working very hard at them, relationships drift apart, or explode apart. Families fall apart, communities fall apart, societies fall apart. And so Peter is saying, 'I want to address that'. 'I don't just want to offer you forgiveness of sins – I don't just want to remove the guilt, or help you feel better about yourself – I want to address the radical disintegration of human existence. I want to invite you to save yourself from this disintegrating generation and become part of a new generation'.

We need to understand what he meant by generation. You see, we hear the message of the gospel so individually and apply it so individually, that it blinds us somewhat to the real message. But Peter was saying **'Repent and be baptized into a new generation'**. What was he saying? Today we talk about generations as in the Silent generation, the Baby Boomers, the 'X' generation or the Millennials. And what we are really saying is that each generation is **a new people defined by a common experience and sharing a world view that results from certain formative historical events.** The Silent generation had WWII and that colored their perspective on the world. Baby Boomers had the post-war prosperity bubble; generation X had Vietnam, Watergate, Chernobyl; Millennials had the wars in Iraq and MTV and the Wall Street internet boom and bust.

Each generation developed a worldview based on certain historical events that shaped their thinking and it made them a whole new people. Their story is told in terms of their experience, whatever that looked like as they grew up. And what they value and how they think and how they behave is all related to that story. I want to press this point because we are altogether too individual when it comes to matters of faith. We tend to think only in terms of me – how my life is a mess and broken and I need salvation. It is and you do. But look at the deeper meaning of Peter's words. Your worldview will define how you live your life – but your worldview is formed by your story – the events of your life that make up how you see the world and give you significance. For example, I'm a Baby Boomer – born after WWII. For my parents, the Silent generation, the war had clearly defined lines between good and evil – the Nazi's and the Japanese were bad – everybody else was good – or at least not as bad. But us Baby Boomers had the Vietnam war where nothing was as it seemed. And as a result each generation has very different views on patriotism, on government, on war, on money, and on what is really significant and valuable.

And essentially Peter is saying, '**You need a new story – you need a fundamental change in your worldview.** The old one is corrupt and falling apart.' He was not inviting them, on the one hand, to experience a sort of personal fix; nor was he inviting them to be members of a club – a Christian club. He was saying, 'Your generation is disintegrating and falling apart – be saved from it. Repent and be baptized into a new generation – a new world view, based on this historical fact – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'. When you become a Christian, you become a member of a new generation, with a new story. This story defines you. This story forms your worldview. This story gives you your significance. What's the story?

It's the story of how God has come into history and created a people for Himself. And because something has happened in history, when you become a Christian it supercedes all other stories, all other events. It is far more formative, far more significant than WWII or Vietnam or the Internet. This is the great story – His story, and if you get into this generation, it becomes your story. It is the story of how God created the world and everything in it and said 'It is very good'. It was perfect and He placed us in that paradise of a garden. But because we turned from Him it became a jungle. But He didn't leave it there. His promise to us, through Abraham, was, by His sovereign will and electing love, to make a new generation out of his descendants. **And in this people He would show the world how to live.** 'I am going to create a nation among nations that will show them how to live. I will come into this people and by My love and power, change the way they think, change the way they live, change the way they do everything. How they relate to each other and the stranger. How they think of others and themselves. How they handle money and possessions. How men and women treat each other – everything'.

But we know that the history of that people was mainly one of failure. They were meant to be a light to the nations, but they ended as darkness. But that's not the end. Again, in history, God came in, one night in Bethlehem. And He came into our world and lived among us for 33 ½ years. And the entire story of the people of God is retold in His life – **this time to perfection.** Born of the line of David the King; He comes out of Egypt; He's in the wilderness one day for every year of Israel's wandering; He's tempted there and He's sustained and fed there; and He is called, like that people, to care for the orphan and care for the widow and the marginalized and care for the poor, and He does. He's called to love God supremely and His neighbor as Himself – and He does. And eventually He bears the curse of the people of God. And the curse for not obeying God was to be cast out. And He was. Not this time just from His home and His country, as Israel was, but into eternal justice and wrath, cast out from God Himself – the Father turns His face away. But Jesus rose from the grave triumphant over sin and death and the curse.

And now, **when we receive Him, that story becomes our story.** That's why the Bible says that the old has gone the new has come. That's why it says that when you become a Christian, you died. Wait a minute, I thought He died! But His story is your story now and when He died you died, because He died in your place. **For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.** Colossians 3:3 Every other religion or philosophy gives you principles to live by, but they don't change your story. Only Christianity gives you a historical narrative, a historical event where God comes in and says, 'The story of My Son will be your story'. Our stories are full of failure and hurt and tragedy – maybe we didn't have a good mother, maybe our father went missing – maybe we had a horrible childhood – maybe our life has been marked by addictions or rejection or anything that cut us and made us bleed. And we're all messed up unless we get a new story. Unless we get a new background. Unless we become a new generation. And this is it.

Peter doesn't say 'When you become a Christian you get a new set of rules to live a better life so you can be like Jesus and maybe your sins will be forgiven.' What the gospel says is that when you receive Christ, you are treated as if you died – His death becomes your death – He took the punishment you deserved. When you believe in Jesus, you are treated as if you've been raised – His perfect life is accounted to you – **His story becomes your story**. And when that happens, it changes the way you look at everything. No longer are you chained to your past, your failures and defeats, or even by your triumphs and success. No longer are you affected by your past but His past. When you become a Christian, your past is gone, and His past is now behind you. When you become a Christian, you enter a new generation, a new community where every part of your life is changed by the gospel. Your life is not centered on your past but His past – not your failures but His triumph. And that changes everything.

Why do Christians die better than everyone? The sting of death has been removed. There is no fear of what happens after – only an eager anticipation of infinite joy. Why are Christians more inclusive than everybody? Our identity now is in Christ – not our national heritage or cultural background, or our personal history. We are freed up to love our neighbor as ourself. Why do Christians care better than everyone else? The love with which Jesus loved us has been poured out through the Holy Spirit into our hearts and flows out to the world around us. Our story has been changed – we're part of a new generation – a new community. And it is utterly different than the world around us. Everything in our life changes. That's the message.

And next week we will dig into what that change looks like. But this morning I believe that some of you still think of Christianity as a kind of holy club where you simply sign up and do certain things, act certain ways, say certain things, but nothing really changes. You've tried to add Christ to your schedule, but your life is not really affected in any profound way. In many respects you still think like this generation. You are more concerned with having a good job, having financial security, building toward retirement than you are with the fact that many of your friends and neighbors and co-workers are still chained to this crooked generation. Some of you are still haunted by your past and that is what shapes your story, not the story of a God who loved you so much He took your curse, suffered your punishment, and offers you His perfect life in exchange for your broken one.

Today you need to ask yourself – 'Do I still belong to this crooked generation or am I in this new generation? Have I been saved from this generation that is falling apart – have I been saved into the generation that is whole and healthy? Do I belong to this new community that is showing the world what living is really all about? Where the Spirit of God is transforming every part of me? Does my past still haunt me, or have I exchanged my pitiful story for His perfect life? Do I need a new story? If that is the case, Peter's message to that crowd so many years ago still speaks today - *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...Save yourselves from this crooked generation."*

*Our gracious God and loving Father,*

*Deliver us we pray from this crooked and disintegrating generation. Unchain us from the story that has defined our thoughts and actions and left us hopeless and lost. Work repentance in our souls and melt our hearts by the majesty and mercy of God. Occupy the throne of our being and take full possession and reign supreme in every part. Let us feel the weight and reality of the truth that we have died and our life is hid with Christ in God. Where Your story defines our life and not our past. Grant us to know that in Christ we died, in Him we rose, in His life we live, in His victory we triumph, in His ascension, we will be glorified. Make us a new generation that lives to delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, Amen.*