

ARM Prison Outreach International

"Ministers' Minute" Volume X Number 6

"COMMUNICATING OUR FAITH TO OUR WORLD"

Editor's Note: This "MM" is an email sermon, the 6th of 2011 --114th overall-- in a series we are sending as an encouragement to preachers and Christian workers around the world. It is my prayer that this message by my brother, Larry Farthing, will encourage you and honor God. Use it as a devotional, edit it, share it, use it or components of it! May God bless your labors! -- Rod Farthing, Development Director

ARM QUICK FACT:

ARM Prison Outreach International has established a "Joplin Tornado fund." Every dollar -- 100% -- so designated will aid ARM's staff and volunteers who have suffered great losses in this calamity. Any excess received will be given to other Christians in the area who have suffered losses.

"COMMUNICATING OUR FAITH TO OUR WORLD"

#1: "When the Christian Faith Was New to This World"

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

INTRO:

What kind of a world was Jesus born into? What was society like when the church was launched on the day of Pentecost in A. D. 30? What kind of a world did those early Christians have to communicate the gospel to?

First century Palestine was a far cry from the "Holy Land" of the Old Testament. Gone were the Assyrians and Babylonians. The world of the New Testament was a Greek and Roman world. Sure, the environment was strongly Jewish, but Jerusalem was no longer the city of David.

Yes, Jesus' message was for the Jews first, but not for long. After the church began in Jerusalem, within one generation it was spreading throughout the Roman Empire. By the time of the Jewish revolt against Rome in A. D. 66-70, Christianity had become a Gentile movement to such a degree that the destruction of the Temple and the capture of Jerusalem had very little impact on it.

The Christian message to the Jews was that Jesus of Nazareth, born of a virgin in

Bethlehem, crucified on a cross in Jerusalem, and raised by God from the dead on the third day was the Messiah prophesied by all the Jewish prophets of old.

The task of the Christian evangel was to convince Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. According to Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, from which I read a few moments ago, this message was a "*stumbling block*" to them because they had erroneously interpreted the prophecies in such a way that they couldn't swallow the idea of a king like Jesus and a kingdom that was spiritual, not militantly material and of this world.

Outside of Jerusalem the task of the Christians was to evangelize the some 54 million Gentiles, who had been influenced and programmed in their thinking by the Greeks and Romans. Not only that, but they were dealing with a population in which at least a third were slaves.

Polytheism, or the belief in many gods, was the going thing among both Greeks and Romans. Temples dedicated to these gods were everywhere. There were the official and traditional religions, and then there were the mysterious cults. "Magic" and superstition played big roles in people's thinking.

By showing the connection of Jesus to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, the Christians could get at least an initial hearing among the Jews and appeal to their desire for the fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah.

And they could usually get the attention of the Greeks by introducing the teachings of Jesus as a new philosophy and by appealing to them the way Paul did in Athens, as described in Acts 17, where Paul used one of their altars dedicated "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" to introduce them to Jehovah as that "unknown god."

The Romans placed great importance on the family unit and the man as the head of the household acting on behalf of his family in approaching and appeasing the gods. This was an opening for the Christian message, that gives a husband and father the role of family priest.

I want to have you focus with me today on how that first century world responded to the Christian message and what the first century believers did about it...

First, let's consider

HOW THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE WAS RECEIVED.

What about the first century Jews? How did they receive the gospel?

For the most part, they rejected it as a false message. They "*demand miraculous signs*" Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1.

Time and time again, as Jesus taught among them, the Jews said, "Show us a sign. Perform a miracle." And Jesus, knowing that one sign would just lead to their asking for another, refused to play their game.

On the occasions when He did do something miraculous, they found some way of explaining it away or finding fault with what had been done.

Jesus didn't fit their preconceived notions, so to their unbelieving hearts the gospel was just foolishness.

Some, however, did have believing hearts and recognized Jesus as the Christ and became His disciples. These were mostly people from among the masses -- poorer, common people -- and only a few of the prominent Jews and Jewish religious leaders accepted Jesus as the Messiah.

For the most part, the Jewish religious leaders did their best to eradicate Jesus and His followers. They had Jesus executed, which, of course, backfired on them. They harassed Christians every step of the way, and they boycotted Jewish shopkeepers and tradesmen who became Christians.

What about the Greeks and the Romans?

Initially, the Romans just ignored Christianity, considering it some spin-off from Judaism. They thought people pretty weird who met on the first day of the week to eat the body and drink the blood of their dead leader!

The Greeks, well, they were curious about it. They saw it as another philosophical view to discuss, debate, and work into the mix.

Neither the Romans nor the Greeks took Christianity very seriously at first and viewed the message of the cross and the resurrection as foolishness.

Eventually, however, the emperors of Rome began to fear the new religion that had no room for more than one god and that certainly had no room for the worship of the emperor, so Christians began to be severely persecuted in the most horrible ways, from crucifixion to being eaten alive by starved lions.

Were some of the Romans and Greeks convinced of the genuineness of the Christian message? Yes. Even some of the Praetorian Guard became Christians because of the witness of the apostle Paul, while he was under house arrest in Rome.

Ultimately, Christianity was tolerated and even placed on the list of approved, recommended religions. When the political powers of the Roman Empire embraced the "Christian religion," a whole new set of troubles began, but I've covered that in a previous message...

Second, consider with me

II. WHAT THE FIRST CENTURY CHRISTIANS DID ABOUT THEIR WORLD.

Some of them defended the faith, preaching and teaching and remaining faithful until death.

The Scriptures record in Acts 9 and 17 that the apostle Paul *"explained"* and *"gave evidence"* that Jesus was the Christ. We read in Acts 17, 18, and 19 that he *"reasoned"* with others about the gospel.

In Philippians 1 he wrote that he considered himself ready to *"defend"* or *"confirm"* the gospel.

In Acts 17 we read that people were *"persuaded"* by Paul's preaching and testimony. In spite of persecution in many forms, he continued to preach and testify until an axe blade was dripping with his blood.

Peter and John insisted in Acts 4: *"We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."*

Peter wrote in his first letter to the churches, *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have"* (3:15). And he proclaimed that hope until he was crucified.

John wrote in his first letter, *"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard."* And he did so until his death, even after being exiled to the isle of Patmos.

The book of Acts says that Apollos *"vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ"* (18:28).

As time moved into the second century, bold believers known as Apologists rose up to defend the faith against philosophical, intellectual, and political attack.

When Christians were accused of "cannibalism" because outsiders misunderstood the Lord's Supper, and of sexual immorality because they loved one another and ate meals called "love feasts" together, and of political rebellion because they taught that Jesus was Lord, not Caesar, men like Justin wrote an open letter to the emperor arguing that Christians were innocent of such charges, explaining what the truth was. He was taken before a judge, where he defended himself and other Christians, but was declared guilty and executed.

Many gave their lives rather than deny that Jesus was the Christ.

But some of the early Christians did deny the faith and return to Judaism or to their pagan ways.

Many others quietly went about living convincing Christian lives, teaching others who would, in turn, teach yet others.

The written Word was preserved, taught, and passed along, from generation to generation, which is why we have the same Scriptures and the same faith as those of the first and second centuries.

CONCLUSION:

So, what should all this mean to you and me? Just this: Since those believers who lived in each era before us, in the face of overwhelming odds and horrible hostility, faithfully continued to live godly lives and preach and teach that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, making disciples of all the nations, you and I can and must do the same! WE MUST COMMUNICATE THE TRUTH OF GOD TO OUR WORLD, JUST AS THOSE BEFORE US HAVE COMMUNICATED IT TO THEIRS! (Otherwise, Christianity is only one generation removed from extinction!)

Our world is quite a challenge, people. It's probably not any more hostile than the first century, but in some ways it's more difficult to convince of the truth of the word of God and the gospel of Christ. Why? I can think of several reasons:

- Examples of Christian failures have piled up through the centuries, providing people with plenty of excuses for rejecting the potential power of the gospel.
- Through the years man has developed such a strong belief in science and the abilities of men that belief in God and the Bible is considered beneath him. Christianity and religion in general is considered a crutch needed by the weak.
- Satan has had over 2,000 years to develop new and exciting ways for man to sin and to become addicted to ungodly, immoral ways of life.

So, shall we concede our world to the devil and just sit comfortably, worshiping in our nice comfortable church buildings, as we wait for the Lord to return?

Or will we be the "*salt*" and "*light*" that Jesus told us to be? Will we be His witnesses, teaching, baptizing, and continuing to teach?

Will we be the "*spark*" that keeps the fire burning at in this congregation, or will we just burn out and be the last generation to know Christ meeting in this building?

Dear people, there are hundreds – thousands, even – here in our community who've never really met Jesus, or who've never heard about a simple fellowship like ours, where without the trappings and traditions of denominationalism people worship the Lord, study His Word, love one another, and pass on the "Good News." Shouldn't we do something about that?

"Remain faithful unto death .." Rev. 2:10B

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In 2010, 71 ABA Bible courses were mailed from ARM every day!**