

The Church of the future: lessons from history

Article by Jurgens Hendriks (shortened)

The preacher wrote in **Ecclesiastes 3:15**: *Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.* There are basic patterns in history that help one gain perspective. From the Old Testament you will recall the 40-year cycles: prosperity and blessing, then a process of degeneration, of a fake religion and external ritual, disobedience; then warnings and eventually ruin (**Deut.8, Judges to Chronicles**). If what the preacher says in **Ecclesiastes** is true, then the secret of the Church of the future can be found in the past. This is ultimately what I want to do.

In his book *The rise of Christianity*, the sociology of religion scholar Rodney Stark (1997: 6-7) discusses the reasons for the Church's remarkable growth between the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the year 350 A.D. From its approximate 7,000 persecuted Believers in the time of **Acts 2**, the Church grew 40% per decade over 300 years, until they numbered approximately 33 million of the total population of 56 million in the Roman Empire ... 33 million out of 56 million!

Stark says the secret for the growth of the Christian church lay in the social networks and intimate interpersonal relationships and loyalties that they had formed, without becoming exclusive and closing their ranks. Their loyalties to Jesus Christ surpassed all other loyalties (Stark 1997: 3-27).

1. **The Christians lived differently to the world.** The evangelical method of the early Church, their mission work, was not done by special preachers, mission organisations or evangelical expeditions. It was simply the testimony that the many small home congregations transmitted (Meeks 1983:77). Their love for each other and for others, their disposition and relationships were based on an entirely different ethos than that of the world around them.
2. **Christians cared for each other and for others out of love.** In the period of 300 years, there were two unbelievably great epidemics in the Roman Empire. From 165 to 180 A.D., approximately a quarter to a third of the population of the Roman Empire, sometimes up to 5,000 people, died per day. During this period, the Christian survival rate was much better than any other group because they cared for each other and for the sick. After each epidemic, the percentage of Christians, as part of the total population, was much higher and large numbers of people joined the congregations. For the Church in Africa, there is no greater opportunity for testimony than the HIV/AIDS epidemic.
3. **Christians arranged their marital and family lives according to Biblical principles.** The sexual morality of the Roman Empire, particularly in and around Rome, the large cities and among the elite, was rife with perversity. Homosexuality, abortion, prostitution and the concomitant marital and family degeneration was shocking. Abortion was so common that infant corpses were one of the causes for the blockages of the sewage systems. In the Roman Empire, despite all the wars, there were 100 women to 131 to 140 men, because so many baby girls had been killed after birth. In the Christian faith communities, people helped to establish a stable marital and family life. This had two consequences: the Christians had a much higher birth rate than the rest of the population and, in Christian congregations there were always more women available for marriage.
4. **The Christians strongly condemned racism and classism.** The Roman Empire globalised because of political, economic and social reasons. The marital and family degeneration, as well as the epidemics, caused the implosion of the populations in parts of Italy. Consequently, people from over the known world of that time had to be lured with incentives to key areas. This resulted in people of all races, nations and languages living in all the large cities. Thus, the potential for cultural and racial conflict was high. Differences in status are common in all communities, and the Roman Empire was no exception. The early Christian congregations addressed these issues with passion.

5. Christians were trustworthy and hardworking – one could rely on them. I was truly surprised to discover how often the New Testament letters mention this. Christians were reliable, honest and hardworking. They were sought after in society at large. Ultimately, in 313, the Roman Emperor, Constantine, exempted the Christian religion from all forms of persecution (Stark 1997:11) and he also accepted this faith. His motive: it is impossible to rule an empire without reliable people, and Christians were reliable people. He wanted to benefit their case, because they would benefit his case.

The statistics indicate how today's established churches are losing their market share, how they are declining and dying. The statistics also indicate two other tendencies: One, the birth process of a whole series of churches that contextualise in the new time. Secondly: the Independent African Churches that joyfully contextualise in the rich African culture and form. The Church will always have a future. This I believe, because I believe in the resurrected Lord Jesus who received all power in heaven and on earth. The Church of the future follows Him on his crucifixion road, which, paradoxically, is both a way of suffering and a way of victory.