

Civilization Transformed
Proper 6
June 17, 2018
Ezekiel 17:22-24, Mark 4:26-34

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Two of today's lessons speak of the tremendous results that come from small beginnings. The Old Testament reading refers to the planting of God's Word as a tender sprig on Mount Zion and growing into a huge tree. The Gospel lesson tells us about a little grain of wheat or a tiny mustard seed growing and producing in great abundance. Both of those texts are speaking of the growth of the church of God — from tiny beginnings it grows and spreads and accomplishes great things — providing shelter for people of all nations and races.

Today the church of Jesus Christ is increasingly under attack by its opponents. In Canada today it seems that virtually any religion is held in higher regard than Christianity by those who strive to be "politically correct". The values that the Church holds — its moral values, its rejection of a homosexual lifestyle and abortion, its belief in the sanctity of life, even its definition of marriage as the life-long union of one man and one woman is openly challenged and opposed. People growing up today have little knowledge of or appreciation for the tremendous contribution and powerful influence for good that the Christian Church had made to civilization. A few years ago an article in *The Lutheran Witness* took a look at the powerful impact for good that Christianity has had on Western civilization. The article was titled "Civilization Transformed". This morning I would like to share some of the contents of that article with you.

Before Christians began influencing Roman society during the first century, human life was cheap and expendable. The murder of infants, child abandonment and abortion were legal and common. The slaughter of gladiators and other bloody forms of entertainment were widespread. Christians courageously opposed Rome's low value of human life. To them, life was a sacred gift of God. It took centuries for their view to win important changes. In the year 374 A.D., Valentinian (A Christian emperor) outlawed the killing of infants, abortion and child abandonment. At the same time, St Basil of Ceasarea mobilized Christians to minister to women facing unwanted pregnancies. A generation later Christian emperors banned the gladiator games, too.

The Christian Church was also responsible for the elevation of sexual standards. Sexual life in the Roman world at the time of early Christianity was highly promiscuous. Adultery, fornication, incest and homosexuality were woven into the cultural fabric. The Roman poet, Ovid, who lived at the time of Jesus, reported that sexual relations had become sadistic and masochistic. Many emperors lived lives of debauchery, having sexual relations with many women and often with puberty-aged boys. Much of the populace followed their leaders' examples. Homosexual behavior was accepted and widespread. In the words of one historian, "There was nothing in which [the Romans] did not indulge or which they thought a disgrace."

But the Christians who believed that "the body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord", spurned these sexual sins. By opposing them, and living a life not given to sexual decadence, the sexual mores of the Christians slowly became the prevailing norms of Western

societies. Their influence eventually led to laws to protect children from molestation and women from rape.

Faithfulness in a Roman marriage was largely unknown. One historian has noted that marriage to the Romans was “detested as a disagreeable necessity.” Contrary to Rome’s low status of marriage, Christian husbands and wives honored God’s Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” Husbands and wives submitted themselves “to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21) Edward Gibbon wrote in *The History and the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, “The dignity of marriage was restored by the Christians”. Before Christianity arrived, women had little or no freedom or dignity in any culture. At the time of Christ, an Athenian woman, for instance, had to go to her quarters when her husband had male guests. She was not permitted to speak in public. She had virtually no rights. Historians say she had the status of a slave. In Rome, the laws greatly curtailed a woman’s life. For instance, she could not inherit property, appear in public without a guardian or testify in court. If anyone doubts it was the teachings of Jesus that improved the life of women, let them ask: Where do women have the most freedom, opportunity and dignity? It is in countries where Christianity has had a major presence. Christianity brought a new and wholesome view of women, which it received from Christ and the apostles. In preparing individuals for membership, the church never discriminated against women. This boldly defied cultural practices of the Greeks and Romans. In teaching both sexes, Christians took their cue from Jesus, who taught men and women alike. The Christian view of women equalized the sin of adultery by no longer defining it only in terms of a woman’s marital status; a married man having sexual relations with a single woman also was guilty of adultery. Unlike the Roman woman, a Christian woman could reject a male suitor, inherit property, and she no longer had to worship her husband’s gods. One historian wrote, “The conversion of the Roman world to Christianity brought a great change in women’s status.”

Christianity had a tremendous role in the promotion of charity and hospitals. Jesus said, “I was sick and you looked after me”. The early Christians took these words to heart, even though Romans saw helping a sick person as a sign of weakness. Plautus, a Roman philosopher in the second century B.C. declared that helping to keep a beggar alive was doing him and society a bad service. In the fourth century A.D., many Romans panicked and fled from a contagious plague in Alexandria, leaving friends and relatives behind to die.

But the Christians were different. They fed and nursed the sick — even total strangers — often succumbing to the plague themselves. Their compassion was so remarkable that the pagan emperor Julian the Apostate said, “The impious Galileans [His word for Christians] relieve both their own poor and ours.” And he lamented, “It is shameful that our poor should be so destitute of our assistance.”

It was in this merciless pagan environment that Christians built the world’s first hospital in 369 A.D. By 750 A.D., there were Christian hospitals across Europe. They built houses of mercy for the sick, for the mentally disturbed, for the aged, for orphans, for infants and for the blind. Many hospitals today carry Christian names. Whenever you drive by a hospital, remember its Christian origin.

Today Christianity is often portrayed as an enemy to science. How untrue! It was Christian theology that motivated the early scientists to explore God’s natural world. The Reformation

created an atmosphere of intellectual freedom of thought. When Copernicus stated that the earth travels around the sun, not the sun around the earth, it was two Lutheran friends who persuaded him to publish his work despite his fear of ridicule — not from the church, but from other scientists. This is surprising to many people, because most only hear that Christian theologians condemned Copernicus' work. It was Johannes Kepler, a devout Lutheran, who brought about acceptance of Copernicus' theory. Kepler's major contributions to understanding the universe included the first three laws of planetary motion.

Universities grew out of the medieval monasteries, whose monks, unlike the Greeks, were not afraid to link theory with research, two vital ingredients of a university. While some of the universities' roots go back to the monasteries of the sixth century, the first true university appeared in Bologna, Italy, in 1158. Soon others — all of them Christian institutions — appeared over much of Europe. Many colleges still have Christian connections. While Christians were not the first to encourage formal education, they appear to be the first to teach both sexes in the same setting, and that was revolutionary thinking. Johann Sturm, a 16th-century Lutheran educator, introduced the grade-level education system to motivate young students to advance to the next grade.

Liberty and justice were also concepts that originated with the Christian Church. Democratic countries assert that no one is above the law. How did this principal originate? In 390 A.D., the city of Thessalonica had a riot, and Emperor Theodosius (A Christian) over reacted, killing 7,000 people. Bishop Ambrose told the emperor he had sinned and needed to repent. In effect, he told the emperor that no one, not even the emperor, was above the law. At first the emperor refused, but, after one month, he prostrated himself and repented in Ambrose's cathedral. The Christian concept of no one being above the law was expanded in 1215 when England's King John was compelled to sign the Magna Carta. Like Theodosius, he was told he was not a law unto himself. Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury, was one of the key figures whose Christian convictions helped give birth to the Magna Carta. Today, politicians, judges and the news media underscore the importance of no one being above the law, but they fail to note its Christian roots.

Christianity has also been on the forefront of fighting slavery. Countries that first abolished slavery were countries where Christianity had the greatest presence. Where Christianity had little or no presence, slavery ended much later or, as in some Islamic-African countries, still exists today. While some in the early church supported slavery, the early Christians freed thousands of slaves, baptized and received them as members, and communed them at their altars. Long before the abolition movement in America, the first formal proclamation against slavery was issued in 1688 in Germantown, Pennsylvania by Franz Pastorius, a German immigrant and a pious Mennonite. In the 1820's, William Wilberforce made powerful speeches fueled by his ardent Christian convictions to persuade the British Parliament to end slavery throughout its vast empire.

We haven't even mentioned the Church's leadership in music, literature, art, and architecture, which have inspired and sustained the emotional and spiritual well-being of countless millions of people throughout the centuries. Carsten Thiede, an academic researcher in Germany, and Matthew Ancona, a British journalist, co-authors of *The Jesus Papyrus* said, "The Christian Gospels are the very building blocks of our civilization. Without them Giotto di Bondone would not have painted his frescoes in the Arena Chapel at Padua, considered one of the major turning

points in the history of European painting. Dante would not have written the “Divine Comedy”; Mozart would not have composed his “Requiem”; and Christopher Wren would not have built St. Paul’s Cathedral in London”.

Yes, the church has grown and spread. Its influence for good has been felt in every century. In morality, education, the sanctity of life, caring for the sick and poor, dignity for women, scientific exploration and discovery, music, literature and the arts, the Christian church has continued to proclaim the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ for the betterment of mankind. My friends, don’t ever be ashamed to be called a Christian. And don’t ever be ashamed of Jesus Christ. We don’t deny that the church has not always lived up to its calling, just as individual Christians don’t always live up to their calling. It’s mistakes we acknowledge. But the world would be a much different place — and a far worse one — had it not been for the followers of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.