

2nd Opinion: Create an alternative caring culture

October 13, 2006

Posted: 10/13/06

2nd Opinion: Create an alternative caring culture

By Rick McClatchy

My deepest wish is for all Texas Baptist churches to experience significant, sustained growth as they reach people with the gospel of love.

How do we make that happen? Looking at the growth of the early church helps us know what to do.

A remarkable period of church growth took place from the New Testament era through the year 350 A.D. During this time, the church grew about 40 percent each decade. Christianity began as an insignificant group, and by 350 A.D., it included half the Roman Empire's population.

How do we explain such significant and sustained growth? The best analysis was provided by [Rodney Stark in *The Rise of Christianity*](#). He learned one of the major reasons the early church grew was because it created an alternative caring culture.

In a Roman culture of power and cruel domination, Christians did the opposite. They served and loved others. Christians were convinced God loved them and they, in turn, were to love others. The church was an

alternative community of love and care for others.

The book of Acts describes how the early church members would sell their belongings to care for those in need (Acts 2:45). In times of famine, they sent relief money to their fellow believers. They humanized and loved all people.

After the New Testament era, the early church continued to carry forth this compassionate alternative society mission. Christians cared for the sick in epidemics rather than fleeing from the infirmed. Christians refused to toss their unwanted infants, especially girls, into the streets. Christians refused to enjoy the bloody gladiatorial contests. Marginalized slaves and women were humanized in the church. Christians cared for their widows and poor.

This alternative caring community was guided not by the values of Roman culture, but by the values of Jesus. People joined this new alternative community because they shared a common dream of the kingdom of God—a kingdom in which care, generosity, love, forgiveness, respect and justice would be lived out by its people.

This kingdom vision was utterly incompatible with the self interest and cruelty that guided Rome. Because Christians were out of step, they were frequent objects of ridicule and occasional persecution.

In spite of this, they lived such compassionate lives that even their critics grudgingly admitted none could match their compassion for others. Thousands and eventually millions found that kingdom lifestyle of love so compelling that they joined Christians.

What would happen if all our churches once again dreamed of being an alternative community of love rather than purveyors of spiritual goods to over-indulged spiritual consumers?

Too idealistic, some say. What if that cynical realism would have been the

attitude of the early Christians? They dreamed, and the dream came true.

They saw a vision of a new, caring community that grew rapidly for three centuries in the face of significant cultural opposition. Could we not become a caring community again and draw thousands to our cause?

About one-third of the world's people, mostly women and children, live in extreme poverty. They live on less than \$2 a day. Nearly one-fourth of Texas children live below the poverty line.

What if we said in the name of a loving God that we will no longer allow such realities to exist? We could ease much of the world's suffering, and thousands would be drawn to Christ and a life of service.

Why? It would prove our faith is real. As Daniel Vestal said, "Worship, devotion, piety is worthless if it is not accompanied by care for the poor." Many are just waiting for a group of spirit-filled people like us to put feet to our dreams and prove we really believe what Jesus taught.

So where do we begin? First, get your church involved in an international ministry to the world's poor (one like KidsHeart Africa, where the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Buckner help children orphaned by AIDS). Second, get your church involved in ministry efforts to the poor in this country. Many opportunities exist along the Texas/Mexico border and in our Texas cities. Third, get involved in ministry efforts to the poor in your own community.

What I'm challenging you to consider is this: Can we create an alternative culture of service and sacrifice that challenges a world where everyone is rewarded for looking out for themselves?

If we can, then even our social and religious critics can hurl their barbs but then concede that no one else cares for people like we do. And if this becomes our reputation, then others will come and join us as new

Christians joined the early church. May this be our vision and our hope.

Rick McClatchy is coordinator of [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas](#).

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.