

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 6, Evangelism and Introduction 6-Min. Video Overview

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So today we're diving into one of history's most amazing case studies in viral growth. But we're not talking about a TikTok trend or a meme. We are going way back to look at how a tiny movement in a forgotten corner of the Roman Empire spread like absolute wildfire.

Let's get into it. And this is really the big question, isn't it? I mean, think about it. No internet, no mass media, no big institutional power behind them.

How on earth did this message travel so far, so fast? Well, it turns out the answer isn't just one simple thing. It's this really dynamic, multi-layered strategy that's, honestly, fascinating. First things first, you've got to understand this was not some top-down corporate-style campaign.

Nope. It was all grassroots, super personal, and it tapped into the most powerful communication tool that has ever existed. Just human connection.

So the way it spread was just completely organic. It moved along the social networks that already existed back then. We're talking about entire households, which didn't just mean family.

It meant workers, clients, everyone connected to that home. It spread through friendships, between relatives, and even in workplaces. You had guys like the Apostle Paul sharing these ideas while he was literally working his day job as a leather worker.

The message was woven right into the fabric of everyday life. And this little phrase from the Book of Acts really nails it. It shows there was this two-pronged approach.

Yeah, they spoke in public, for sure. But the real engine, the thing that made it all go, was what happened in private, in people's homes, just one conversation at a time. It was less about sermons and more about doing life together.

Okay, so that explains how it spread from person to person. But how did they even get people to listen in the first place? You have to remember, the ancient world was a crowded marketplace of ideas. So many gods, so many philosophies.

You really had to do something to stand out from the noise. And they had a few ways of doing just that. One of their key methods is something the scholar Craig Keener calls power evangelism.

And the idea behind it is actually pretty straightforward. You get people's attention for your message by demonstrating it in some tangible, noticeable way. So things like healings weren't just seen as random miracles.

They were framed as a little sample, a sneak peek of the future restoration their whole message was pointing to. And to make this idea really concrete, Dr. Keener tells this great story from when he was young. It's about a woman named Mabel Cooper.

She had this really bad knee, and the doctors, well, they just couldn't fix it. So there's a young Craig Keener, working a summer job, nothing fancy, and he sees her struggling. And he just offers to pray for her knee, right then and there.

No big production, no special ceremony. Just a simple offer to help in the middle of an ordinary day. And what happened? A few days go by, and her knee is actually better.

And that right there, that tangible result, that sign, it opened a door. See, it wasn't the end of the conversation. It was the beginning.

That healing led to deeper talks about her life, about faith, and eventually about her healing from suspected lung cancer. The sign got the attention. The relationship is what delivered the message.

But, you know, it wasn't just about signs and wonders. These folks were also ready to mix it up intellectually. They'd hold public debates.

They'd engage with the cultural leaders of the day. And they were also really good at being, well, opportunistic. Something big would happen, like that earthquake in Philippi.

And they'd use that crisis as a moment to demonstrate their message and their character. But maybe, just maybe, the most powerful method of all had nothing to do with what they said, or even the amazing things they did. It was the quiet, but incredibly compelling, witness of how they lived their lives together, as a community.

If you look at the Book of Acts, it lays out this pretty radical model. I mean, they prayed together, sure. They ate together in each other's homes.

But then there's this: they shared their possessions, radically providing for one another so that nobody was in need. Now, you have to understand, in the Roman world, which was all about status and class, this was just unheard of. It was completely countercultural.

And what was the result? Outsiders looked on with favor, and their numbers grew every single day. Their community itself was the advertisement. And this wasn't some happy accident.

It was totally by design. This quote makes it clear. Their love for one another was meant to be a public sign.

It was their billboard, the thing that would make people stop and ask, what is going on with these people? Their unity gave them credibility. OK, so we've talked about the how. But what about the where? Where did they decide to go? And this is where things get really interesting.

Because you see this amazing mix of what they believed was supernatural guidance and just plain smart human planning. On one side, you have these stories about what they saw as divine leading. The spirit tells someone to go talk to a guy in a chariot, or gives them a clear no about entering a certain region.

Or they get a vision that sends them to a whole new continent. But then on the other side, they just use some incredible common sense. They went places where they already had connections, like Barnabas going back to his home turf.

They played to their strengths, like Paul using his education and citizenship. And this is key: they targeted influential cities. And Dr. Keener has this fantastic analogy for this strategy.

Think about a city like Ephesus. Why go there? Well, because ancient Ephesus was basically the internet of its day. It was this massive hub, a crossroads, where people, ideas, and goods were constantly flowing in and out.

So the strategy was, if you can plant the idea there, in that central hub, all those people will carry it out for you to all the other places. It's smart, it's strategic, and wow, was it effective. All right, so let's pull all these threads together.

What can we take away from all this? When you look at the whole picture, you don't see a rigid formula. You see a movement that was incredibly dynamic, flexible, and able to adapt. So at the end of the day, there wasn't one single secret sauce.

It was this flexible, multifaceted approach. It was all grounded in real personal relationships, but it was authenticated by a lifestyle that was just radically different. And they were smart about it, focusing on those influential hubs to help the message spread far and wide.

It was a movement that knew how to adapt and connect with all kinds of different people in different places. And all of this kind of leaves us with one big question to think about. In our world today, with social media and just constant information overload, what can these ancient strategies teach us? What can we learn from this person-to-person movement about how important ideas really spread and actually change the world? Something to think about.

Thanks for digging into this with me.