

Introduction

MY AIM IN THIS BOOK is to begin a discussion about early Christian mission that will impact how we think about and approach mission today. By offering a faithful historical narrative and highlighting the innovative work of intercultural workers, I want to tell some of the story of early Christian mission from around AD 100 to 750—also known as the patristic period. The goal of this exercise is to offer meaningful reflection for the modern global evangelical church as it presses forward in mission.

Studies in the history of Christianity often focus on the development of Christian thought, key personalities, important events, and movements within the church. While these are worthy areas of emphasis, I prefer Justo Gonzalez's take on Christian history—that “the history of the church is the history of its mission.”¹ Indeed, each Gospel writer (including Luke in Acts) remembered the following commands and promises as the last words spoken by the Lord to his disciples: “Make disciples of all the nations . . . Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation . . . As the Father has sent Me, I also send you . . . Repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His [Jesus'] name to all the nations . . . You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”² This mandate was to proclaim Christ—his person and his work (especially his death, burial, and resurrection)—and to persuade the nations to follow his life, example, and teachings.³ More

1. Cited in Escobar, *Changing Tides*, 4.

2. Matt 28:19; Mark 16:15; John 20:21; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8 (NASB); also Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, 25; Marshall, “Who Were the Evangelists?” 256.

3. I am working from the broad definition that evangelism is proclaiming the person and work of Christ. For more on the essence of the message (*kerygma*) proclaimed by the apostles, see Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching*; and Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 76–115.

Mission in the Early Church

than mere parting words, these evangelical values were also at the center of Jesus' earthly ministry.⁴ After three years of apprenticing with the Lord, the Twelve and the broader community of disciples⁵ had also seized these convictions and the gospel spread, as early Christian history testifies. At the end of the second century, Tertullian (ca. 160–220) boasted to the Roman authorities in Carthage (North Africa): “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods.”⁶ Though Tertullian was given to exaggeration, the pagan Governor Pliny of Bithynia (in northern Asia Minor) was certainly not. In a letter to the Emperor Trajan in 112, he indicated that Christians were present in the towns and cities, and could be found on every level of society in his province.⁷ The reality of the gospel traversing class lines—itself an indication of a mature church movement that was transforming culture—was acutely observed when the noblewoman Perpetua faced martyrdom alongside her servant Felicitas in Carthage in 203. In all, by the time of Constantine's rise to power in the early fourth century, there were around six million Christians in the Roman Empire alone—some 10 percent of the population—and the gospel had also spread eastward to places such as Edessa (Osroehene), Armenia, and Persia.⁸ Indeed, early Christian history was the history of mission.

What do we mean by mission? Following the consensus of missiological thought in most traditions, I am persuaded that Christian mission flows from the mission of God (*missio Dei*) as “God is the one who initiates and sustains mission.”⁹ That is, God is a missionary God and he invites the church to participate in his redemptive work among the nations.¹⁰ So, I define *mission* as “the divine activity of sending intermediaries . . . to speak or to do God's will so that God's purposes for judgment or redemption

4. Robert, *Christian Mission*, 11.

5. For a discussion on the relationship between the Twelve, the seventy, and the broader discipleship community, see Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 21; and Smither, *Augustine as Mentor*, 6.

6. Tertullian, *Apology* 37.4 (ANF 3).

7. Pliny, *Letter* 10.96, cited in Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 1:141; cf. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 162–64. For more on Pliny's background and career, see Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 72–73.

8. Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 6.

9. Moreau et al., *Introducing World Missions*, 17.

10. Cf. Gruder, *Missional Church*, 4–5.

are furthered.”¹¹ *Missions* then is the specific work of the church and its *missionaries* to make disciples of all nations through evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and related ministries.¹² Following Escobar’s definition, *missiology* is “an interdisciplinary approach to understand missionary action. It looks at missionary facts from the perspectives of the biblical sciences, theology, history, and the social sciences.”¹³ Thus, in offering an appraisal of early Christian mission, I will examine both the history of missions (strategies, methods, and approaches) and the work of missionaries in an effort to understand some of early Christian missiology. While my approach is historical, I will certainly interact with the early Christian narrative from a missiological point of view—one that is informed by contemporary, global perspectives. This is not to impose mission on history because, as church history is the history of its mission, it is quite reasonable that we read Christian history missionally.

Perhaps some may ask—at what point did mission become mission in the history of the church? Is it not anachronistic to refer to mission in the early church? Bosch is correct in asserting that in the patristic period “the Latin word *missio* was an expression employed in the doctrine of the Trinity, to denote the sending of the Son by the Father, and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son.”¹⁴ However Robert argues: “The idea of ‘mission’ is carried through the New Testament by 206 references to the term ‘sending.’ The main Greek verb ‘to send’ is *apostollein*. Thus *apostles* were literally those sent to spread the ‘Good News’ of Jesus’ life and message.”¹⁵ That is, mission has been central to the identity of the Christian movement since its inception. Christianity is a missionary faith. Referring to mission-related vocabulary, Bosch adds: “For fifteen centuries the church used other terms to refer to what we subsequently call ‘mission’: phrases such as ‘propagation of the faith,’ ‘preaching of the gospel,’ apostolic proclamation,’ ‘promulgation of the gospel,’ ‘augmenting the faith,’ ‘expanding the church,’ ‘planting the church,’ propagation of the reign of Christ,’ and ‘illuminating the nations.’”¹⁶ In short, though the Constantinian paradigm shift beginning

11. Larkin, *Mission in the New Testament*, 3.

12. Moreau et al., *Introducing World Missions*, 17; for more on what constituted a missionary in the early church, see Hvalvik, “In Word and Deed,” 266–73.

13. Escobar, “Evangelical Missiology,” 101.

14. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 228.

15. Robert, *Christian Mission*, 11.

16. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 228.

Mission in the Early Church

in the fourth century certainly brought confusion to an understanding of mission, it remained a central aspect of Christianity and we can certainly identify missionary motives and endeavors even when the term mission itself is not always used.

So, why study early Christian mission? Evangelical Protestants, the Christian tradition with which I most identify, are often led to believe that the history of missions began with William Carey in the late eighteenth century; hence, a reflective work on early church mission should challenge this idea and fill in some important gaps in our understanding of missions history. For a number of years, I have been teaching courses on missions history and have had to offer supplemental lectures on the early church period because of the lack of available scholarship. So, in many respects, this project has grown out of classroom lectures and discussions. My hope is that the present work will serve as a resource to professors and students as they consider the history of the church and its mission. On a personal note, I am privileged to work in two fields of study—early church history and missiology—and this project is an opportunity to combine these two passions.

Presently, there are several excellent books that address missions history. Stephen Neill's *A History of Christian Missions* is a comprehensive work that covers the history of Christianity to the mid-twentieth century; however, only around 10 percent of the book deals with the early church. Similarly, Ruth Tucker's *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* offers a colorful look at the lives of missionaries; yet, like Neill, it only briefly addresses early Christianity. Though Stephen Bevans' and Roger Schroeder's *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* is a helpful volume on the history of missiology, their treatment of early church missiology is also limited. Eckhard Schnabel's two-volume *Early Christian Mission* is also a significant work; however, it largely focuses on mission in the New Testament and only the last section of volume two interacts with the post-first-century church. Finally, while Michael Green's celebrated work *Evangelism in the Early Church* does address the same period as the present work, it deals primarily with kerygmatic proclamation. Though mission cannot exist without verbal proclamation, the present study will examine early church mission from a broader and more comprehensive perspective. While these important books offer a significant point of departure for the present study, they also point to the need for it.

In the first chapter, the historical landscape of the early church from 100 to 750 will be laid out, including a brief summary of where the gospel spread. We will also consider how missions were affected by the fourth-century change in Christianity's official status—from illegal to official religion—and by political changes such as the fall of Rome and the rise of Islam. It should be noted that this chapter will not offer a comprehensive narrative and so, in some cases, the previously mentioned works on missions history should be consulted. In chapter two, we will explore the identities of the early church missionaries. In chapters three to eight, we will describe some factors and strategies that seemed to characterize mission during this period. These themes include suffering (chapter three), evangelism (four), Bible translation (five), contextualization efforts (six), ministry in Word and deed (seven), and the church (eight). Though the church can certainly be regarded as an outcome of mission, it will also be considered as a foundation of and means for mission. I will conclude the book with a final, reflective epilogue.

As this work aims to be a conversation with early church mission and missionaries, each chapter will include a relevant passage of Scripture as well as reflections where connections between early church and contemporary church practice can be made. Finally, I will close each chapter with some questions for reflection—points that will facilitate dialogue with Scripture and early church practice as the present global church moves forward in mission.

What are the limits of this study? As the period in question is vast and the places and peoples are diverse, it will be impossible to treat thoroughly each context of Christian mission. Thus, this work aims to serve as an introductory reflection on some prominent marks of Christian mission in the early church. Indeed, each chapter could eventually be expanded into a book-length project. Also, my intent is to focus on the history of mission as it has been defined. So, while political figures and developments will at times be unavoidable, this work is not concerned with the expansion of Christendom through political force but with the practical outworking of the *missio Dei* in the first eight and a half centuries through proclamation, service, and suffering. Finally, though the stated scope of the work is 100 to 750, at times some discussion of first-century mission will be included to provide a context.

Finally, this book is not primarily written for scholars; but rather for students of Christian history studying at the undergraduate and initial

Mission in the Early Church

graduate level. As I have endeavored to make this an accessible and readable work, my hope is that it will serve the church, including those with no background in historical studies. I am persuaded that every follower of Christ should engage with our Christian memory as we strive to be the people of God on mission today.

SAMPLE