

# A Practical History of Gospel Mission

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These brief notes introduce a missiological approach to the recorded history of gospel mission. Whilst a historian should be able to tell us what happened, a missiologist will want to know *why* it happened, and what *usually* happens, and what is *likely* to happen again in similar circumstances. From history we will try to gain insights that may help us in our work of mission today.

With this aim, we will look at a small selection of significant times, places and initiatives.

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## Africa – the First 600 Years

In the earliest days, Christians proclaimed the true gospel and followed the teachings of the New Testament. They were not yet confused by newly developing church dogmas, traditions and authorities or by the strong influence of pagan cultures.

### HOW DID THE GOSPEL FIRST REACH AFRICA?

Documents written during the first two centuries mention three centres of early Christianity in Africa. They are Alexandria, Cyrene and Carthage. How did the good news travel from Jerusalem to these three cities?

#### 1. Alexandria (Egypt).

Visitors from Egypt were in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost and heard Peter’s declaration about the Christ (Acts 2:10). Some were Jews and some were proselytes (Gentiles committed to the God of the Jews). They probably went back to Alexandria and told their friends.

One early writer tells us that Mark settled in Alexandria after writing his Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2:16

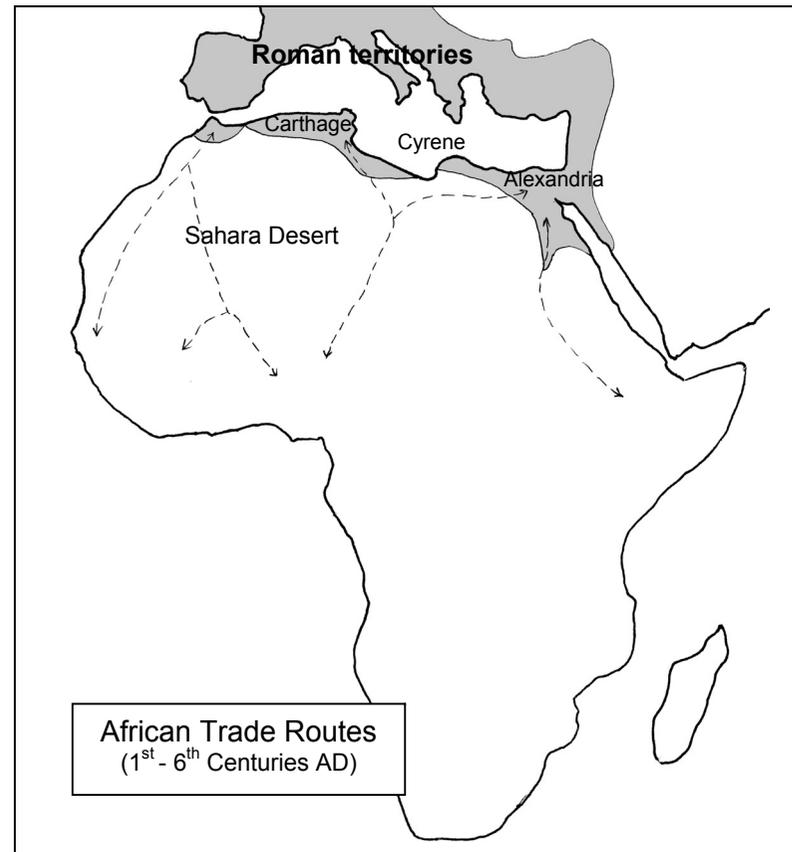
Apollos, who taught about Jesus in Ephesus and Corinth, was from Alexandria, and would naturally tell his friends and family there (Acts 18:24).

#### 2. Cyrene (Libya).

Some Libyans, including Gentile proselytes, were among the crowd in Jerusalem who heard Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). They probably told their people in Libya about it.

Alexander and Rufus, sons of Simon of Cyrene (who carried the cross of Jesus) are mentioned in Mark’s Gospel as people known to the believers of his day (Mk 15:21).

Some men from Cyrene heard Stephen’s testimony and told the Gentiles in Antioch about it (Acts 11:20). They probably told their friends in Cyrene too.



### 3. Carthage (Tunisia).

Carthage is not mentioned in the New Testament, but by AD 198 there are said to be many Christians there.<sup>1</sup>

As a major port, Carthage would be in easy contact with Alexandria and Cyrene. One writer tells us the message also came by ship from Rome.<sup>2</sup>

## HOW DID THE GOSPEL SPREAD INLAND?

### *The Mediterranean coast of North Africa*

Within two or three generations, large Christian groups were present in all the towns along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. In AD 198 Tertullian wrote, “We began only yesterday and yet we have filled every place belonging to you: cities, islands, castles, towns, markets, even your military camp, your companies, the palace, the senate, the forum.”<sup>3</sup> Fifteen years later the growth was even greater: “We are a great multitude, almost a majority in each city.”<sup>4</sup>

The Roman Empire controlled a narrow territory along the entire Mediterranean coast. But the gospel was not restricted to this coastal plain. Further inland were tribes of Imazighen or Berbers (known as Getules and Moors). Tertullian spoke of “the varied races of the Getules and the vast territories of the Moors, inaccessible to the Romans but *subjugated to Christ*.”<sup>5</sup> There are remains of church buildings and inscriptions far beyond the Roman frontiers.

### How did the gospel reach the inland parts of northern Africa?

1. Raiders attacking Roman property on the coast captured Christians and carried them inland as slaves.

2. Christian refugees fled inland from pagan persecutions on the coast.

3. Church leaders were banished by law from Roman territories and forced to live inland.

4. Large farms were established inland by retired Christian soldiers and officials. Seasonal workers travelled long distances to work there.

5. Imazighen went to the coastal markets for trade or work, and here they would certainly meet Christians. They returned inland to tell their family and friends.

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 37

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 36

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, 37

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *To Scapula*, 2

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, 7

This constant movement of people enabled many African Imazighen to hear and accept the gospel and then pass it on to their people over a very wide area.

### The benefits of persecution

The Roman authorities repeatedly attempted to suppress Christianity. Bibles were burnt, meeting rooms destroyed, believers tortured and executed.

In these circumstances why did so many Imazighen accept the gospel of Christ? The Roman governors, who were persecuting the Christians, were also in conflict with the African tribes. This brought the two oppressed peoples together. Many Imazighen saw Christianity as a progressive way forward in opposition to Rome. It became *an African resistance movement*.<sup>1</sup>

In these years of persecution the churches of North Africa flourished. By the third century, most of Tunisia and much of Algeria was known to be Christian. In addition to her martyrs, North Africa produced three great theologians: Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine.

### The tragedy of power

For 300 years the number of believers grew rapidly in many parts of the Roman Empire... and among some of the leading families, including the mother of the emperor Constantine. In AD 313 the Edict of Milan ended the persecutions. The Emperor welcomed the church leaders into his palace at Rome and enlisted their help in the administration of his empire. He himself later requested baptism.

After the Edict of Milan, believers in North Africa had freedom from persecution. They even had government approval and support. Now we might think they could launch a mission taking the gospel throughout Africa. But it did not happen.

The large majority of believers in Africa were linked not with the Latin churches known to Constantine but with an indigenous Christian movement speaking Tamazight. Their most famous leader was Donatus and they were known as Donatists. Jerome, around AD 393, tells us that Donatism was the religion of “nearly all Africa”.<sup>2</sup> These African churches had spread far inland and had no wish to be controlled by the Catholic churches on the coast approved by Constantine.

Instead of uniting to take the gospel throughout the continent, the two denominations began a bitter power struggle. For a hundred years the

<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see the document “Rapid Mass Movements”.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, 93

Catholics tried to destroy the Donatist leadership of the churches throughout the region. African independence fighters, who understood little of Christianity, allied themselves with the Donatists. In the conflict many properties were destroyed and believers killed.

The concept of Christian civilisation was promoted by Augustine in his famous book *The City of God* (AD 426). Augustine hoped that the Government and Church would work together for the benefit of all. But this required everyone to belong to the same Church, supporting the government. It gave rise to the influential concept of “christendom” (a place where Christianity rules).

The Donatists were finally condemned by the Roman authorities in AD 412. Catholic control of all churches was then enforced by fines, beatings, confiscation of property and banishment. The effect of this was to establish Latin rather than Tamazight (Berber) as the language of Christianity in Africa.

The Catholics now had the power they desired, but even with government support they could not secure the future. Africans who had embraced Christianity as an indigenous movement rejected it as an imperial religion. The Imazighen continued to support their independent Donatist churches, but the conflict distracted them from the more important task of gospel mission. Their eventual defeat by a European “christendom” brought an end to this African movement that might otherwise have accomplished much.

When Vandal and Arab invaders arrived in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, the churches were in no condition to offer spiritual resistance. Within a few generations North Africa had become “the land of the vanished church”.

For 1300 years after the Arab conquest, North Africa had no knowledge of the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ. During this period there were a few Catholic and Orthodox priests and monks, but they taught their own traditions and rituals, placing their faith in their Churches rather than in Christ. Not till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was the true gospel proclaimed again in northern Africa.

### **Why did the African churches fail?**

Catholic and Donatist churches were actually quite similar and had developed the same weaknesses. In general they followed the same teachings and practices. It was merely a question of administrative authority that divided them. So we can see in both...

**1. A false gospel**, promoting the Church rather than Christ. People were taught to depend on priests and sacraments rather than the Saviour. Baptised as infants, they grew up thinking they were safe as members of the

Church, relying on the Church to intercede with God on their behalf. They were accustomed to sin all week and receive forgiveness on Sundays.

**2. A false ministry.** In each church there was one man appointed as pastor or minister. The congregation sang and listened to the sermon and gave offerings but did not learn to serve the Lord in practical ways. Little thought was given to cross-cultural mission because the laity were too ignorant and the clergy too busy with church services.

**3. False leadership.** Power was focused on the control of buildings. When the hierarchy of authority was destroyed by controversy and conquest, the churches could no longer function.

**4. False holiness.** There were holy times, places and ceremonies, but not holy hearts. Saints and sinners were mixed in church, with many hypocrites among them. (The Donatists did try to exclude those who had compromised in time of persecution.) When the church buildings and shrines of the saints were destroyed, the church was gone.

**5. Ignorance of God’s word.** Many errors and abuses were a result of ignorance. In Catholic churches the Bible was read and taught in Latin, which most Africans could not understand. In Donatist churches much of the teaching was probably in Tamazight (Berber). But this was not a written language, and scripture was not translated into Tamazight. Even the Latin scriptures – copied by hand – were hard to find and expensive to buy.

**6. Political alliances.** For a hundred years Christians were disputing among themselves. The Catholics supported Roman power; the Donatists backed African independence. The result was conflict, disillusionment, and sometimes fighting and burning of property, and even loss of life. Eventually the Donatists were defeated by the Catholics and condemned by the Empire, but shortly afterwards the Roman Empire fell, and the exhausted African churches fell with it.

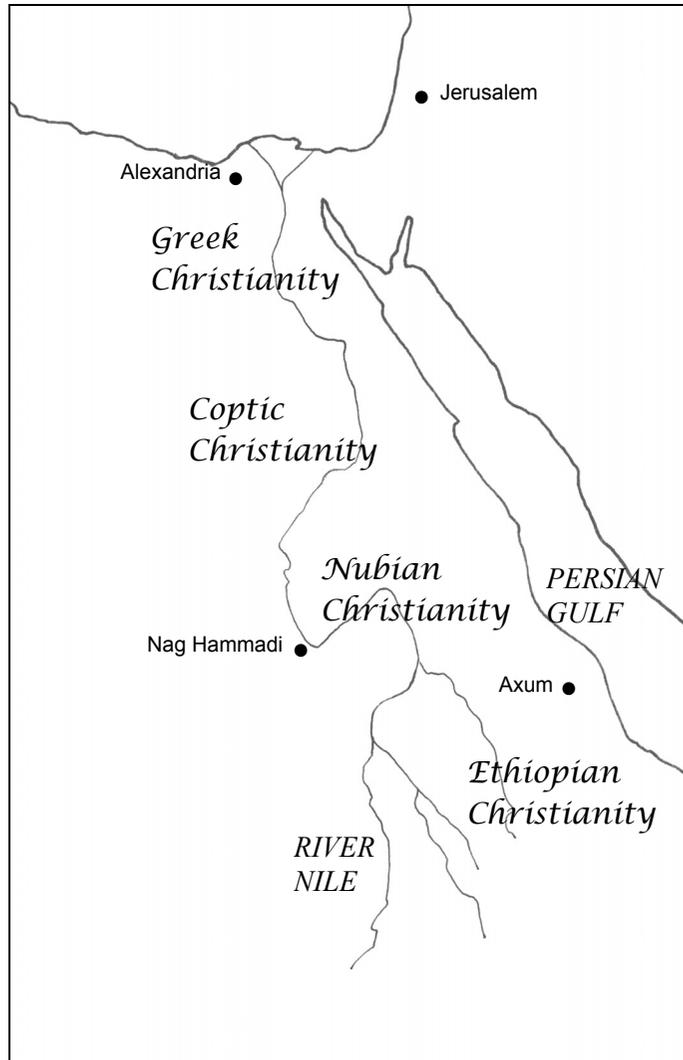
**Conclusions:** A missiologist studying this history might notice certain things:

- The gospel spreads when people travel naturally from place to place.
- A situation of social and political tension may easily trigger a mass movement.
- The church grows better through persecution than in time of prosperity and power.
- Believers without scriptures in their own language find it hard to survive.
- Political alliances distract the church, corrupt its witness, and threaten its destruction.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a full account of early North African Christianity, see Robin Daniel, *This Holy Seed* (Tamarisk, 2010).

## Alexandria, Egypt and the Nile valley

The city of Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great as a centre of Greek culture and language. One member of the first-century Jewish community there was Philo, who tells us there were a million Jews in Egypt (out of a total population of 8 million people). There were also many Gentiles committed to the God of the Jews.



By the late second century, thriving Christian communities were present in Alexandria with many churches and a theological school. **Clement** and **Origen** were two famous teachers who explained and defended the Christian faith.

By the second century the gospel had travelled at least 500 miles (800 km) to the south up the River Nile. Christians were speaking and writing there in the Coptic language, although the teaching had been seriously corrupted (as seen in the texts found at Nag Hammadi).

### What were the reasons for early success?

1. In Alexandria, as elsewhere, there were Gentiles in the synagogues responsive to the gospel. They believed in God but were unhappy with the religious and racial complications of the Jewish faith.

2. The dominant Greek culture taught a philosophical devotion to asceticism and self-discipline that inclined people to respect Christian morality.

3. The underlying Egyptian culture was obsessed with death, and life after death, believing in a continued ghostly existence of the soul. The gospel offered a much stronger assurance of eternal life with the resurrection of the body.

4. A traditional belief in pharaohs as the incarnation of gods made it easy to accept Jesus as God incarnate and as an eternal King who will come to reign on earth. Several well-known pagan myths were also fulfilled in reality by Christ.

5. There was easy transport up the river Nile to all the important towns.

By AD 300 there were two forms of Christianity in Egypt, reflecting two cultures – *Greek* in the urban centres of the north and *Coptic* in the countryside further south:

**Greek Christianity** was dominant in Alexandria and the major towns. It appealed especially to *educated people* who enjoyed discussing philosophical ideas and identifying deeper meanings in the scriptures. Greek Christianity had shifted away from its Jewish roots and ways of thought. Its teachers attempted to define abstract ideas and to understand mysteries in the manner of Greek philosophers. This led to many speculations about the nature of Jesus as deity, man or angel, created or uncreated, eternally or temporarily the Son of God.

Many *Gnostic sects* appeared from AD 130 onwards, promoting their various teachings. Clement and Origen both tried to make biblical teaching understandable to people of Greek culture whilst avoiding the errors of

gnostic syncretism. Despite their efforts, by the sixth century there were 500 Christian sects in Alexandria.

Several times during the third century, the urban churches in Egypt suffered severe persecution by decree of the Roman Empire. These Greek churches were weak and divided, and many of their members left Egypt at the time of the Arab invasion.

**Coptic Christianity** was established further inland and in the countryside among *uneducated people*, finding a response especially among the poor. There was a Coptic Christian counter-culture deliberately contesting the Greek influence of the urban centres.

Christian teaching was carried south by travellers on the Nile, *speaking Coptic* and *translating texts* into several Coptic dialects. In many cases Christian beliefs were mixed with legends of Osiris and local superstitions, which appealed to the people but also misled them.

Three men are worthy of note in the history of this region.

**Antony** (c.AD 251–356) was a Coptic hermit who did not speak Greek.

**Pachomius** (c.AD 292-346) established an early monastery, which led to the foundation of many others.

**Athanasius** (c.AD 297-373), as leader of the church in Alexandria, tried to purify both rural and urban Christianity, and attempted to unify them.

The **Council of Chalcedon** (AD 451) was a conference of Christian leaders assembled to define correct doctrine and identify the true Church. It supported Greek Christianity against the Coptic churches.

At the *Arab conquest* in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic leaders persecuted both Greek and Coptic Christians, and imposed a tax on all who refused to convert to Islam. The *Coptic church survived* much better for several reasons:

- They were poorer people and further from the coast, so could not easily move away from Egypt.
- They practised their faith in their own language and possessed Coptic Christian writings.
- Identifying strongly with their own people and cultural heritage, they were resistant to Arab control, as they had been to Greek control.

They have survived to this day, although Coptic Church practices have diverged from the New Testament. Influenced by pagan and Jewish religion, they have priests, sacraments and icons, with fasting and chanting, relying for salvation on the services of the Church rather than on Christ.

**Greek Christianity** was later revived in the region when the Greek Orthodox Church was re-established in Egypt.

### **Conclusions:**

- The inhabitants of Alexandria and Egypt had traditional beliefs which helped them to understand and accept the gospel.
- Ease of travel greatly assisted its progress up the Nile.
- Christianity may appeal in different ways to the educated and uneducated (to city people and rural people).
- Syncretism may aid acceptance but also lead people away from the true gospel.
- The use of local languages for teaching and writing may be a key to long-term survival.<sup>1</sup>

### **Ethiopia and Nubia**

**Ethiopia** was *not reached in the early years* when believers still proclaimed the true gospel and followed the New Testament.

In the fourth century two young Christian men were rescued from shipwreck in the Persian Gulf and taken to the king in Axum (Aksum). They spoke Greek and were greatly respected. When the king died, one of them (Frumentius) became regent for the young heir, and Christianity became the religion of the royal court. But there were many different tribes and language groups in Ethiopia, who did not hear or understand anything of the gospel.

Around AD 480 nine monks from Syria gained the approval of the king and started monasteries in Ethiopia. They taught in the official Ge'ez language of the rulers and translated scripture into Ge'ez. The king and the monks urged all the people to be baptised, to take a new name and receive sacraments in the church buildings they had erected. Here we see a strategy sometimes called "Ethiopianism", in which a Christian ruler tries to create a *national church*.

The church gained much land and became a political power. But the people were Christian in name only. There was little teaching, and none in local languages, and not enough clergy. The result was *syncretism* and much reversion to paganism – there were still sacred groves and many pagan beliefs and practices. The church was modelled on the Old Testament temple, not on the New Testament house fellowships. There was more respect for relics and icons than for the Bible, and prayer was mostly to

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account see Mark Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa* (Baker, 1996), chapter 2.

Mary. Ethiopian Christianity had diverged far away from the New Testament faith of the early church.

**Nubia** was a kingdom with a distinct language built on the ruins of the ancient empire of Meroë,<sup>1</sup> which was itself developed from the kingdom of Kush (Cush) mentioned in the Old Testament. It seems that Nubia was also *unable to hear the true gospel* in the early days, although the “Ethiopian” in Acts 8 was probably the Nubian court treasurer.

The king’s mother, bearing the title Kandake,<sup>2</sup> held power in choosing the next king, and would rule in her own right if her sons were still children. There was a general belief in the king as a religious mediator between God and man, and eventually this may have helped the Nubians to accept the idea of Christ as a heavenly king and mediator.

By the late fifth century there were monasteries along the Nile where poor people lived, but no evidence of Christian influence in the court of the rulers.

Rival teachers representing various Christian sects appeared at the royal court in the following century. Through dispute and controversy, the Greek Orthodox church eventually prevailed, and the Church became part of the government. This was a *politically powerful* form of Christianity which offered sacraments and compelled conformity, but showed little understanding of the need for personal trust in Christ or growth in Christian character.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusions:

- The traditional beliefs of a people may help them understand particular aspects of the gospel.
- If we are slow to reach an unreached people, they may hear and accept a corrupt Christianity (or some other religion).
- The conversion of a powerful ruler may open a nation to a new faith, but it may then become a political religion.
- If the truth is not taught from scripture, the Church will be corrupt.

<sup>1</sup> pronounced MER-o-wee or MER-o-way

<sup>2</sup> pronounced kan-DAK-ee or kan-DAK-ay

<sup>3</sup> See Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, chapter 4.

## Early Evangelical Missions (17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

### THE LONG DELAY

It may seem surprising that the gospel was known in Europe and the Bible available in European languages for many generations before any cross-cultural gospel missions were launched from there.

The rediscovery of evangelical faith may be dated from the Waldensian movement in the thirteenth century, and the Moravian (Hussite) and Lollard (Wyclifite) movements of the fourteenth. But more than 300 years then passed before the Moravians launched their first cross-cultural initiative in 1732 (to the Caribbean and Greenland).

The Protestant Reformation is usually dated from Luther’s 95 theses in 1517, but again we see a period of almost 200 years before 1706, when the first Lutheran missionaries Ziegenbalg and Plütschau were sent out to a Danish colony in south-east India. Almost a century then passed before William Carey launched his Baptist mission in Bengal in 1793.

### Why were European Evangelicals so slow to start cross-cultural mission?

The Waldensians, Moravians, Lollards and Protestants were all violently persecuted by the Catholic powers in Europe. For *four hundred years* they were pre-occupied simply with survival, their preachers moving rapidly from place to place to escape arrest and execution. The Lutherans attained greater stability on account of the physical protection given by Protestant rulers governing small territories in Germany and elsewhere.

The chief concern of the Protestants was to refute the gross abuses of Roman Catholicism and also the errors they perceived in each other as they sought to establish national state churches holding to Protestant doctrine. For much of this period they had to deal with unbelief and ungodliness in many of their own ministers, which contributed to the apathy of their congregations. In most cases they also had three beliefs which discouraged world mission. These beliefs were...

#### 1. The ruler of each nation is responsible for the religion of his people.

If a ruler invited a Protestant body to establish itself as the national religion, it would then occupy the existing Catholic church buildings, or build new ones, and appoint bishops (Lutheran) or Synods (Calvinist) to administer them. The nation would then be considered a Protestant nation and its inhabitants (of all races) taught to be Protestants.

Protestant theologians taught that God himself appoints rulers, who should therefore be respected and obeyed. For this reason, missionaries should not be sent anywhere unless the ruler has requested them.

How then could a nation become a Protestant nation? Its ruler must either be converted to Protestantism or replaced by a Protestant. As the conversion of Catholic rulers had proved difficult, the primary duty of Protestant nations was therefore to conquer territories, replace rulers, and establish colonies in which a Protestant church could be installed as the official religion of the people living there. For three hundred years Catholic and Protestant powers were engaged in a violent struggle for territory in Europe and also in their colonies overseas.

The number of people accessible to Protestant missionaries on this basis would be quite limited. In the 17th century, they included indigenous peoples in America and in various Danish and British colonies, especially in India.

Chaplains were appointed in India by the Church of England to serve British colonial settlers. At first they were forbidden to preach to Indians by authority of the East India Company administering the territory, for fear that this might damage commercial relations. But from 1813 onwards, the British government reduced the powers of the Company, and missionaries were allowed with reluctance to start working there.

This was the early nineteenth century, and to this point no Protestant missionaries were yet going to places where the rulers were Muslim or Buddhist or held to traditional animistic practices. Indeed, many Protestant leaders believed it was quite wrong to preach the gospel in such places. There were two further beliefs underlying this point of view...

## **2. The Great Commission was given only to the Twelve Apostles, and completed by them.**

It was commonly believed that the Twelve, in obedience to the command of Christ, had actually proclaimed the gospel to the ends of the earth. This meant that nations now ignorant of the gospel must have rejected the testimony of the apostles. Such peoples were therefore guilty before God, and their many sufferings were a judgment upon them in consequence of their rejection.

As they now stood condemned before God, it was not his purpose to offer them salvation. In these circumstances, any attempt to relieve their afflictions and give them hope would be both presumptuous and futile.

## **3. God will himself convert all who are predestined to salvation.**

Many Protestants, following John Calvin, held the dogmatic view that the conversion of sinners is God's responsibility as an act of his sovereign will. Indeed, the individuals who will be saved are known to him from eternity past, or from the foundation of the earth. As nothing can possibly prevent their salvation, human efforts to secure it are quite unnecessary. A Baptist minister rebuked William Carey, saying, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine." A lesser man than Carey, when rebuked so emphatically, might well feel obliged to stay at home.

### **Conclusions:**

We see how theological beliefs, church administration and religious persecution may all hinder mission. Our church leaders must study and teach what the Bible says about gospel outreach and encourage their people to go into all the world.

## **THE FIRST PROTESTANT MISSIONS**

We have mentioned the Moravian Church in eastern Germany. The first Evangelicals to plan and undertake a cross-cultural mission were Moravians sailing to the Caribbean in 1732. Within 30 years, they had sent hundreds of missionaries to many parts of the world under Protestant control.

Influenced by the Moravians, William Carey in England became convinced that the Great Commission was intended for all disciples, not just for the first disciples, and must therefore be obeyed in every generation. In 1792 the Baptist Missionary Society was formed to support Carey, and within a few years each Protestant denomination in Europe had its own missionary society operating in places under the control of Protestant governments.

By the 1830s a concern was felt for the wider world, for nations that did not have a Protestant ruler, and in particular for those under Muslim control. This was a far more dangerous prospect. Much of the Middle East was dominated by the Ottoman Empire with its capital in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey). These lands were very unstable, and prone to wars, plagues and famines.<sup>1</sup>

The first mission to Muslims in the Arab world was launched in 1829 when Anthony Norris Groves, an English dentist, took his family to Baghdad. Others followed, in every continent, increasing greatly in number during the later decades of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Penguin, 1964), pp.220-240

But what were these evangelical missionaries attempting to do? They adopted various strategies with varying degrees of success...

## Evangelical Missions in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

### MISSION STRATEGIES

The history of evangelical mission is a vast subject in its own right.<sup>1</sup> Here we will do no more than identify four distinctive strategies, illustrated briefly by specific examples.

#### *Reforming strategy*

In the 1830s the Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission to Ethiopia opted for a strategy to reform the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. They believed that if the Orthodox Church could be converted to the true gospel, it might then be able to carry the good news throughout Africa. The missionaries translated the Bible into the Amharic language of the ruling tribe and taught the people to read. At first the Orthodox leaders were pleased because the Protestant missionaries were not trying to start a separate church and might indeed help to modernise Ethiopia with advanced European technology.

But the CMS missionaries started teaching the Bible and did not support Orthodox traditions. They would not accept the custom of praying to Mary and the saints. They discouraged the use of pictures and relics in public and private devotion. They did not approve of monasticism. By 1837 there were severe tensions and in 1843 the CMS missionaries were expelled from the Orthodox Church and from Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of reforming “corrupt” churches was not successful as a strategy. And of course, in most countries (lacking a traditional church with potential for reform) it would be impossible.

#### *Diplomatic strategy*

In 1875, Henry Morton Stanley visited Kabaka Mutesa, king of Buganda (now part of Uganda). Stanley was a newspaper reporter, not a missionary. It was he who found David Livingstone.

King Mutesa was a violent man, selling large numbers of slaves to Arab dealers based in Zanzibar. Stanley spoke to him about power, observing that the sultan of Zanzibar claimed that his own great power was due to his

<sup>1</sup> See Neill and also Herbert J Kane, *Concise History of the Christian World Mission* (Baker, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, pp.215-7

religion, Islam. But Europe, Stanley said, is far more powerful than Zanzibar. As the European religion is Christianity, this proves Christianity is the truest religion. Mutesa admitted to Stanley that he respected Christians as the best of men. The king called his counsellors together and asked them to choose between Islam and Christianity. They chose Christianity.

Stanley was delighted and sent to London, asking for Protestant (Anglican) missionaries to come and teach the word of God. They did, and began to translate the scriptures into the Luganda language. But Roman Catholics also came to King Mutesa and engaged in critical debates with the Protestant missionaries in the presence of the king.

Eventually Mutesa asked to be baptised by both Catholics and Protestants. Both refused because he was an extremely violent man, still selling many people into slavery, and he also had more than 200 wives. He returned to African traditional religion.

After Mutesa’s death, his son murdered a missionary and also tortured, mutilated and killed thirty-two boys and youths who refused, as Christians, to submit to sodomy. Others were also martyred. Finally a civil war broke out between African Catholics and Protestants.<sup>1</sup>

Later a number of local kings and chiefs did accept Christianity, and churches became well established under British colonial authority. But trying to win the ruler and then teach the tribe caused many political complications and produced a superficial and nominal Christianity over wide areas.<sup>2</sup> It did not prove a very successful strategy. And of course, it would not work in places where the ruler was unwilling to co-operate.

#### *Colonial strategy*

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the British Empire governed almost one-fourth of the earth’s land area, and one fifth of its population. Many people, including members of the British government, hoped that the territories under British control would become a Christian empire, introducing civilisation and Christianity to the indigenous peoples in their care. Setting an example for other colonial powers, this would eventually result in a Christian world with every tribe and tongue peacefully united under godly rulers.

Evangelical missionaries were all concerned about poverty, disease, tribal conflict and ignorant superstition (killing twins, burning widows, ritual mutilations, child sacrifices etc.). They were also concerned about issues of

<sup>1</sup> Neill, pp.384-6

<sup>2</sup> M Louise Pirouet, *Black Evangelists: the spread of Christianity in Uganda, 1891-1914* (Rex Collings, London, 1978)

heaven and hell, eternal life and the forgiveness of sins. Their aim was to introduce *Christianity and civilisation* to British colonial territories.

This meant converting local people to Christianity and also civilising (developing) the country with schools, hospitals, trading posts and markets, establishing law and order with police, courts and prisons, all under the benevolent authority of the colonial government.

It was generally believed that the best way, or perhaps the only way, to halt the Arab slave-trade in Africa would be to stimulate an alternative trade in more humane and more profitable goods. This was an aspect of civilisation on which missionaries and colonial officials could agree.

Christianising and civilising – both were necessary, but opinions differed concerning which of these should come first. Should the missionaries proclaim the gospel message and then offer the benefits of civilisation to those who believe? Or should they civilise the country and afterwards explain the gospel?

Some said: We must feed the hungry, heal their illnesses and give them personal security before we can expect them to consider religious issues. Indeed, men and women must be educated to think logically and to read and write before they can understand what we believe. Once they have a measure of civilisation (development), they will see the importance of serving the true God and can then be introduced to Christianity. The first thing to offer them is *civilisation*.

But others said: People cannot become civilised until they think and behave as Christians. The priority is to proclaim the gospel message, helping men and women to be born again, to be filled with the Holy Spirit and so become better people. Then we will have suitable teachers for schools, nurses for hospitals, businessmen, politicians and policemen who will run their country honestly and wisely as civilised people should. The first thing to offer them is *Christianity*.

In certain places there was disagreement among the missionaries on this issue. The earliest Anglican missionaries in Nigeria, for example, emphasized civilisation, especially through trade, education and European technologies. The next generation insisted on the need for personal conversion through gospel preaching with no Western trappings or material benefits.<sup>1</sup>

On a world scale we notice an interesting pattern. Missionaries working in regions with a prosperous sophisticated ruling class, such as India and China, usually stressed *Christianising*. They expected that conversion to Christ of significant individuals would enable these to purify and uplift their

<sup>1</sup> E P T Crampton, *Christianity in Northern Nigeria* (Africa Christian Textbooks, Bukuru, 2004), pp.26-30

nation, leading it to adopt the higher principles Christian civilisation. But missionaries in poorer and more primitive regions, such as the Pacific islands and central Africa, generally held the priority of *civilising*, to meet immediate physical needs and demonstrate the benefits of European ways. They believed that a measure of development was urgent and necessary in preparation for conversion to Christ.

The theological background of the missionaries influenced their strategy too. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most were post-millennialist, which accorded with *civilising*. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries many were pre-millennialist, which accorded with *Christianising*.

The majority, of course, attempted to do both. They proclaimed the gospel message while offering medical care and teaching children to read. As a result, many people now have a Christian identity in areas formerly under British control. In such regions there is still a great emphasis on English education and a strong Anglican church.

To that extent the colonial strategy may be considered reasonably successful. But of course, regions that were never colonised by a Protestant power could never be reached by this strategy.

### **Did the British Empire *help* mission?**

In various ways the British empire was a help to gospel mission. The *pax britannica* (British peace) brought law and order to many places, suppressing tribal wars and local tyrannies. In 1833 slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire, breaking the power of Arab slave traders in Africa, so that people no longer lived in fear of capture.

Major roads and railways were built connecting ports and administrative centres. Ships sailed regularly to far places, providing better transport for missionaries. Local roads and bridges made it easier for village people to reach mission schools and hospitals.

Safer conditions facilitated many innovations. New crops and agricultural machinery resulted in more food and better nutrition. Medicine and simple surgery brought better health. Western technology and industrial products were welcome everywhere. All this created an openness to the wider world and new ideas. Schools stimulated a thirst for knowledge and for fresh opportunities. Printing and literacy enabled people to read and teach the Bible. Western missionaries were welcomed as representatives of a highly attractive global culture.

### **Did the British Empire *hinder* mission?**

In certain ways the British empire severely hindered gospel mission. Colonial officials at every level promoted the interests of commerce and

administration rather than Christianity. They created political boundaries that still separate tribes and cause wars today. In some places such as northern Nigeria the colonial authorities favoured Muslim chiefs, giving them power over wide areas that quickly became resistant to the gospel. European politics affected certain colonies such as Ghana, where German missionaries were expelled by the British authorities on account of war between the two colonial powers.

Colonial officials sometimes encouraged trade in liquor and guns. Many were arrogant and immoral, and missionaries had to protest against their actions. Critics have alleged that officials and missionaries were working together to promote a system of foreign control and exploitation, but there is little or no evidence of this. Missionaries were often in areas beyond the control of colonial authority and indeed, when administrators arrived, the missionaries frequently defended the rights of local people against government interference.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Pioneering strategy***

Most of the world, of course, remained beyond the reach of Europe's colonial powers. To take the gospel to the ends of the earth required a pioneering strategy that could be applied anywhere.

Missionaries who went to places without the protection of military authority were compelled to depend entirely on the providence of God. They had no support from governments or police or soldiers. They lacked the benefit of good roads, bridges and medical care. They must be willing to lay down their lives if necessary for the cause of Christ and the people they wished to serve.

In fact white people had little resistance to tropical diseases and climatic conditions. It was the custom in Europe and America to bury the dead in a wooden box called a coffin. It is said that some missionaries carried all their possessions out to Africa in a coffin. Many, within one or two years of arrival, were buried in it. Some of these missionaries were deeply appreciated and loved by the people who responded to their teaching and their practical care.

The majority were not Anglicans but Nonconformists (Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Brethren etc.)

In most cases the pioneering method was to:

**1. Learn the local language**, not just the national or trade language. This had three advantages:

- The missionaries could ask and answer questions and teach effectively, communicating easily with everyone, including women and children.
- The individual tribes, using their own language, gained a sense of identity and self-respect as Christians.
- Converts and disciples could soon do what the missionary did, and indeed do it better. This encouraged local initiative and the emergence of local leadership.

**2. Preach in public**, especially when crowds were gathered for festivals, markets, funerals or weddings. The male missionaries would travel widely, usually on foot, sleeping in small canvas tents. They spoke especially about sin and the need for salvation through faith in Christ. They urged each of their hearers to make a personal response.

**3. Translate scriptures**, with the help of one or more local believers. Small leaflets would be printed on a simple portable press brought from Europe. The missionaries and converts then distributed this literature and taught people how to read it.

**4. Start schools for children**, using the scriptures as their reading text. Clinics were also set up to meet urgent medical needs.

**5. Start churches**, where converts would gather regularly for teaching and prayer. Sometimes a simple building was erected.

**6. Send out evangelists** who were trained to read from the scriptures and explain the way of salvation. Much of the evangelism was done by local people accompanying the missionary or on their own. From the mission base, men would trek over a wide area, establishing temporary preaching points in far places where they could stay the night and eventually start a new church.

It is said that the best thing which the foreign missionaries did was to translate the New Testament into local languages. Local people preaching in local languages were far more effective than the missionaries themselves in winning converts. It is reported that when eighty Ugandan evangelists went out two by two in the 1890s, carrying Gospels and tracts, they transformed Uganda.<sup>1</sup>

### **Comments**

It is unnecessary to find fault with any of these past endeavours in gospel mission. If we belittle the sacrificial labour of previous generations, we risk being judged ourselves by the same measure (Matt 7:2). Before their own master they will stand or fall (Rom 14:4). To read the letters and journals of

<sup>1</sup> See Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag* (Apollos IVP, 1990).

<sup>1</sup> J V Taylor, *The Growth of the Church in Buganda* (1958); Albert B. Lloyd, *Dayspring in Uganda* (1921), <http://anglicanhistory.org/africa/dayspring.html>

these brave and dedicated missionaries is a humbling and inspiring experience.

The positive results of the pioneering strategy, in particular, are evident today. In many unreached places, this may still be the only possible way of working, and we may gladly follow the example of the old-time missionaries. But the flow of people to the cities, and especially to the major commercial centres of the world, requires us to consider some fresh strategies for our own generation.

We have seen the importance of certain things in every age: missionary self-discipline and self-sacrifice, commitment to travelling, public proclamation and testimony to strangers, translation of scriptures into local languages, gathering of disciples into fellowships etc. Without a commitment to these, we will not make much progress in any place or any age.

## **FINANCIAL SUPPORT**

During the past two hundred years, the system of financial support for pioneer missionaries sent from Europe and America has changed. In fact it has progressed through a succession of stages:

### **1. Early 19<sup>th</sup> century... chaplains and personal representatives**

Chaplains (pastors) from Europe and America were paid a salary to care for settlers of their own nationality and church denomination in India and elsewhere. Some of them also explained the gospel to local people and distributed literature. Henry Martyn was a chaplain who gave his attention and indeed his life to reaching Muslims with the word of God.

At this time a small number of independent missionaries were sent out from Britain and America by wealthy individuals who guaranteed their support. There were also colonial soldiers or administrators who resigned their position in order to go out and preach the gospel to the local people; these were supported by expatriate Christians engaged in business or other secular work nearby.

### **2. Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century... voluntary societies**

Starting with William Carey, the voluntary societies were organised like trading companies, sponsored by investors in the homeland who paid for agents to proclaim the gospel in other countries. The society would ask for subscriptions from individuals and churches in the homeland and send out as many agents as it could afford to support.

The voluntary societies were usually associated with particular denominations. Baptists supported the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS);

Congregationalists supported the London Missionary Society (LMS); Anglicans had the Church Missionary Society (CMS); Methodists had the Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS). There were several others.

Money sent to the society's headquarters in the homeland would then be transferred through banks or trading companies with offices on the mission field. Here it was shared among the agents of the society. These missionaries would also, in some cases, take paid employment to supplement their income and to finance additional activities.

### **3. Late 19<sup>th</sup> century to late 20<sup>th</sup> century... faith missions**

Launched originally from Britain, the "faith missions" recruited evangelical believers from any church denomination who had experience of gospel outreach at home and were willing to "live by faith". The missionaries they sent had no stated salary or secular income. In accord with British culture, they never asked for money and never contracted debts. Their policy was to pray and trust God to provide. Individual Christians and churches would also pray for guidance in what they should send. These gifts were forwarded from the mission headquarters in the homeland through banks and trading companies to the missionaries on the field. The full provision of the missionaries' daily needs was testimony to the existence of a prayer-hearing God and an encouragement for others to put their trust in him.

The heroic vision of the "faith missions" and their absolute trust in God had a wide appeal to the Christians of their generation. More than 30 societies were founded on these "faith mission" principles after 1865. Within 100 years (by 1975), the inter-denominational "faith missions" had won more than 6 million converts in Africa alone.<sup>1</sup>

### **4. End of 19<sup>th</sup> century to present... pledged gifts**

Launched from the USA, the "pledged-gift missions" have required their missionaries to raise a specified sum for their personal support before leaving the homeland. In accord with American culture, the missionary will appeal for money to friends and churches, who then promise to give a certain amount each month. Every few years the missionary is required to go on "home assignment" in order to raise his or her pledged support to an agreed level.

This has had some unfortunate consequences:

- Missionaries spend much time and energy travelling in their homeland to raise support.

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<sup>1</sup> Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions* (Regnum, 1994), p.102

- Many Christians in the homeland do not want to see a missionary because they are sure the missionary will ask for money.
- Some who are excellent missionaries but poor fund-raisers are forced to leave the field for lack of support.

The “pledged-gift” system is gaining acceptance in Britain, as the heroic ethos of the “faith missions” has faded, although British culture is still resistant to missionaries actually asking for money.

### **5. Every period... tent-making**

Following the example of the apostle Paul, there have always been evangelical believers engaged in secular occupations in foreign lands and sharing their faith when opportunity arises.

The Moravian method was to send several missionary families together so they could create a self-supporting community – some to raise vegetables and livestock for food, others to start schools and establish workshops providing an income, and others to translate scriptures and proclaim the gospel.

To support himself, William Carey worked at first on a farm in Bengal, and later taught in a college. Anthony Norris Groves worked as a dentist in Madras. Robert Morrison served as a commercial translator for the business community in China. These were married men with families.

The main disadvantage of “tent-making” is the time and effort spent in the secular activity. Not many people have the ability and energy to make a success of both secular work and gospel mission (in addition to caring for a family).

But there are advantages. A secular job may offer natural contact with local people, providing a good example of diligent and honest labour to local converts, and may indeed secure a regular income. In certain countries this is the only way to obtain permission for residence.

In some places, if a man is paid to preach the gospel to strangers they will ignore what he says, asserting that he is only doing it for the money. But if he is a working man, preaching in his spare time and paying his expenses from his own pocket, they are more likely to respect his testimony.<sup>1</sup>

### **Comments**

The financial support of pioneer mission continues to be one of the most difficult issues facing evangelical believers today. We have a choice now, as in the past, to use the money entrusted to us either for our churches or for our missions. So long as we continue to invest in buildings, equipment,

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<sup>1</sup> For more on “tent-making”, see R B Dann, *The Primitivist Missiology of Anthony Norris Groves* (Tamarisk, 2007), pp. 196-7.

pastors and programmes for our own benefit, gospel missionaries will not be adequately supported and much of the world will remain in spiritual darkness.

### **COMITY**

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were many unreached places where several Protestant denominations or societies all wanted to launch a gospel mission. As competition between them would be likely to confuse the local people and make the discipling of converts more difficult, they developed a system called Comity.<sup>1</sup>

The nation or region would be divided into smaller sections and each mission would be allocated an area or language, or several, to which they would have exclusive rights for evangelism and church planting.

At first this helped to avoid the problem of enquirers, converts and employees moving constantly from mission to mission. But comity agreements raised further difficulties. Believers were required to conform to the denominational teaching and practice that had been allocated to their area, even when they preferred other styles used elsewhere. Indigenous evangelists desiring to proclaim the gospel to neighbouring tribes were forbidden to do so. And the territorial agreements became irrelevant when converts started moving to larger towns where they would naturally mix with believers from various areas. Other problems arose when a mission was allegedly failing to fulfil its commitment, or when agencies not party to the original agreement subsequently arrived on the scene.

It became evident that comity agreements often produced the opposite result to that intended, by defining and cementing denominational differences imported from the West.

### **Comments**

To some extent, comity is still observed by mission societies claiming spiritual rights to particular areas or people-groups. In one way it is natural. We do not like to see our own converts and disciples, after many devoted hours of teaching and pastoral care, going off to join another fellowship or mission. But this is something we must accept. It is one of the many emotional and spiritual challenges a missionary must face.

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<sup>1</sup> Comity is pronounced with the emphasis on the first syllable: *COM-ity*.

## CHRISTIAN SETTLEMENTS

“Christian settlements” were established in order to introduce Christianity and civilisation to designated areas by acquiring land and then governing it on Christian principles.

In 1787 a trading settlement was founded by a private company in **Sierra Leone** on the west coast of Africa. During the next twenty years, people of African origin were encouraged to settle there. Most of these had been slaves in America, and their number was greatly increased from 1807 when the slave trade was officially abolished. The territory became a British colony.

As neighbouring people from the surrounding areas began moving into Sierra Leone, a distinctive culture developed, with influences from both America and Africa. In 1827 the Fourah Bay college was established by the Church Missionary Society in the capital Freetown as a training school for African missionaries, pastors and teachers. Samuel Crowther was a former slave who studied and then taught at the college. In 1864 he became Africa’s first Anglican bishop and travelled to Nigeria as a pioneer missionary. He had some success among his own Yoruba people but found other tribes less receptive.<sup>1</sup>

Observing the progress of the Sierra Leone settlement, a private American organisation, the American Colonisation Society, decided in 1820 to create a second territory as a homeland for larger numbers of released slaves. The acquisition of land was not well managed but the eventual result was the independent nation of **Liberia**.

Many observers hoped that from here the rest of Africa might be evangelised, but Christian principles were not evident in the leadership of Liberia. There were tensions between the settlers and the neighbouring African tribes. Missionaries were not sent out with any evident success, and the significance of this settlement for the gospel was probably very limited.<sup>2</sup>

### Comments

The high hopes and expectations that many people had for the “Christian settlements” were never fully realised. Sierra Leone and Liberia contributed relatively little to the evangelisation of Africa. As a strategy, this is probably not one we would consider adopting today.

<sup>1</sup> Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, pp.164-8

<sup>2</sup> Shaw, pp.174-8

## Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

### *National churches*

Between 1910 and 1945, mission leaders from the West became preoccupied with the need to hand over responsibility for mission churches, properties and activities to “national leaders” in many parts of the world. They could not foresee that this would be accomplished in a sudden and most unexpected way. Two major wars between the European powers brought an abrupt end to the colonial era. Many missionaries were forced home, and national church leaders in newly independent nations were obliged by circumstances to take responsibility.

After their traumatic experience of war, many people in the West had become disillusioned with the idea that the world could be gradually civilised and Christianised. But there were still missionary societies in existence. Many of their missionaries were willing to offer medical, educational and other skills whilst serving under national leadership. Others were setting out once more as pioneer apostles in unreached places, and especially where Islam was the dominant religion.

### *The ecumenical movement*

In the 1940s, after the European wars, many Western church leaders felt an urgent need to unite all Christians so they could speak effectively with one voice on political, social and economic affairs. As unity was the essential aim, differences of belief were overlooked and matters of doctrinal truth played down. On this basis the ecumenical movement was launched.

At that time many Evangelicals were associated with mixed denominations and national churches whose leaders were mostly not evangelical. Their denominational background had accustomed them to tolerate great differences of belief and doctrine for the sake of unity, and they have tended from then onwards to support ecumenical initiatives. Evangelicals from other church backgrounds have felt considerable pressure to follow suit and conform to this ecumenical agenda.

The consequence is that evangelical church and mission leaders are now frequently compelled to decide whether they can support statements issued by bodies that include Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Liberal churches, and in some cases Muslims, Hindus and atheists, and whether they can engage with these in communal acts of worship or witness.

### *Issues of authority*

The culture of the West, and especially Europe, has changed during the past hundred years from a general Christian consensus to a severe

disillusionment with the traditional form of Christianity known to them. Church leaders are now more often criticised than respected. National churches such as the Church of England are under such severe cultural pressure that many of their leaders feel obliged to approve any cultural changes demanded of them.

One such issue is the so-called marriage of homosexuals. There is a fear among church leaders that resisting the culture of their nation would alienate the populace from the Church. It might also terminate the support of the government and result in legal action against them if laws are passed requiring such marriages to be conducted by the national church.

But failure to persuade their colleagues in Africa and elsewhere to accept and support such changes has caused severe international tensions within these major denominations.

Underlying this is the issue of authority, which raises several questions. If scripture says one thing and culture another, which should be followed? Is it essential for the church to satisfy journalists and politicians and people of the world? And then of course... Are Western church leaders entitled to impose their views on the rest of the world? Is unity more important than anything else? Do African church leaders have the right or the liberty to split the denomination and continue on their own?

It is unclear how this issue of authority may affect cross-cultural mission, and especially the financial involvement of Western funding agencies in their associated denominations and societies in other parts of the world.

### Comments

During the past hundred years, Western churches have changed as Western culture has changed. Evangelicals elsewhere, unmoved by cultural changes in the West, now sometimes find themselves in disagreement with the institutions that brought them into existence.

But this is not a new state of affairs. We have faced situations like this before. In the 1960s, for example, many missionaries were shocked to discover that their home churches in America and Britain no longer believed the Bible to be the reliable word of God. New missionary recruits, sent out to join them, were in some cases not claiming to be Christians at all. The indigenous churches started by these missionaries, in Africa and elsewhere, held faithfully to the true gospel while those who supported them did not.<sup>1</sup>

Now we should note how the apostle Paul had a strong desire “that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the

<sup>1</sup> For one example, see Charles Partee, *Adventure in Africa: The Story of Don McClure* (Zondervan, 1990), pp.374-386.

same judgment.” At the same time Paul accepted that “there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Cor 1:10; 11:19).

In the above case, *those who were genuine did become recognized*. From the 1960s onwards there was a rapid decline in the progressive, liberal, Western institutions which refused to believe the Bible; many of their churches and missions in the homeland were closed. At the same time, there was dramatic growth in the African churches which held firm to the truths of scripture that they had heard and believed from the beginning.

The Lord God is able to bring the present circumstances to a similar conclusion. That is what a missiologist, aware of past history, might expect.

## Conclusion: the Value of History

Most people study history in order to know what happened in the past, without thinking that such knowledge may help us in the present day. But looking at certain times and places, we have attempted in these pages to learn *practical lessons* that may be useful in our task of worldwide gospel outreach.

Conclusions and suggestions derived from a study of history must always be tentative, because every situation we face will be different in some way from what has gone before. But a missiologist who has learned from the failures and successes of the past will surely be better equipped to deal with the challenges and opportunities of the present.

It is wisdom that we need, and such wisdom comes through curiosity, research, observation and careful analysis of fact. May God guide us in seeking and gaining this wisdom so we may do our work well.

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