MISSIONARY MOTIVATIONS

Challenges from the Early Church



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Matthew Burden

Missionary Motivations: Challenges from the Early Church

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Chapter 1

The Shape of Early Christian Mission

The story of Christianity's early rise is remarkable. No one who lived in the Roman world when Augustus Caesar reigned could have predicted that within three centuries, the pagan underpinnings of the empire would be in a state of catastrophic collapse, replaced by the rapid advance of an obscure sect from the backwaters of Palestine. While it's true that exposure to new or different systems of belief happened regularly in ancient Rome, those new systems were usually incorporated into the existing pagan structure without much trouble. But in Christianity, a new movement had broken out upon the world, one with universal and exclusive claims, before which all the centuries-long traditions of Greco-Roman paganism shattered with startling suddenness. It wasn't just the Roman world, either—within three centuries after Christ, the new faith was sweeping across the vast Asian continent to the east and making inroads deep into Africa and northern Europe. These gains would go on to be magnified and multiplied, time and time again, over the centuries that followed.

One of the most striking elements of this growth was its originality. The Mediterranean world had never seen something like this. As a general rule, religion in the ancient Mediterranean was a pluralistic affair. Each nation had its own faith, its own gods, and while the nations' gods were thought occasionally to go to war with one another, most religious systems were not exclusive. This was particularly true of the Roman mindset, which accepted the notion that while they had their own pantheon of gods, other places might have other gods (or local variations of the Romans' own gods, called by other names). A Roman who found himself in a foreign land would often just add that place's native gods to his own pious observances, at least while he remained in that area.

But a faith which claimed the prerogative of total and exclusive allegiance—not only over its own people, but over all people—was something wildly new. While a few faiths, like Second Temple Judaism, held truth-claims which applied to all people, such faiths did not actively seek the recognition of those truth-claims from everyone else. Jews believed there was only one God and thought the Romans' polytheism false, but they did not necessarily expect all Romans to come to a recognition of that truth. They wrote against idolatry and welcomed Gentile God-fearers, but never engaged in the sort of sustained outreach which characterized Christianity's rapid ascent.

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What caused this dramatic onward surge in Christianity's rise? At a fundamental level, it must have been driven by the simple, practical reality of the gospel's proclamation, either by evangelists or ordinary Christians, as the witness of their lives gave them opportunity to share their faith. Seen in its broad outlines, it looks like a marvelous success story in evangelism, mission, and personal witness. Many modern Christians—particularly those from an evangelical background, who put great emphasis on the dissemination of the faith as a foundational part of the Christian life—feel very much at home with the story of early Christianity.

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But dig a little deeper, and that feeling fades. There is a certain dissonance that arises between the way we think about the need for evangelism and mission, and the way that early Christians appear to have thought about it. To get a sense of that dissonance, consider the following:

- The Great Commission texts from Matthew, Acts, and the long ending of Mark are largely absent from the many scriptural references in the texts of the post-apostolic centuries. Strangely enough, those verses appear not to have loomed large in the early church's mindset.
- While the spread of Christianity is undeniable during those early centuries, the actual means of that spread are often difficult to piece together from historical sources. The dissemination of the faith is not center stage in most sources.
- Where early Christian sources do speak about the spread of the Christian faith, they rarely put the matter in terms familiar to modern Christians, still less to evangelical Christians. There is seldom any appeal to obedience to biblical commands like the Great Commission, nor does one often find references to a sense of concern for the salvation or spiritual wellbeing of nonbelievers.

What motivated the spread of Christianity if it wasn't a matter of biblical obedience or concern for others? We can't always know for sure, but we can make some plausible guesses from the things the early sources do talk about.

While this book examines Christianity in the periods after the apostolic age (with just a couple of exceptions), it is worth noting that some interesting

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features are present in the New Testament itself. The disciples, for their part, appear to be motivated by obedience to Christ's command. And Paul, when he describes his own missionary calling as an apostle to the Gentiles, evinces a clear sense of concern for nonbelievers (see, for example, Rom 10:14–17). There are also other motivations at play in the New Testament—in Paul's thought, not least the idea that his missionary labors win for him affirmation from the Lord (as in 2 Tim 4:7–8).

Note, however, that the New Testament does not direct much counsel regarding evangelism or missionary labors to anyone other than the apostles themselves. The epistles are largely concerned with giving practical counsel to ordinary Christians regarding the life of faith, and yet very little of these practical sections are concerned with missional practices beyond the general appeal of living in holiness.

From the way that post-apostolic Christians dealt with evangelism and missions in their sources, it seems that they picked up on this distinction between the apostles and other Christians. Judging from those texts, the generations of Christians who followed the apostles thought that Paul's missionary sentiments, part and parcel as they were of his calling as an apostle to the Gentiles, did not necessarily extend or apply to anyone beyond the apostle himself. Similarly, there appears to have been a general feeling that the Great Commission had been given to the disciples and their generation, and that the disciples had fulfilled it (at least in an incipient way). Far from being a continuing obligation of all Christians, the Great Commission was interpreted as a *fait accompli*, as illustrated in the following passage from the monastic writer Cyril of Scythopolis (sixth century):

> Accordingly, when [Jesus] sent out his disciples for the salvation of our race, he said, "Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." On receiving this teaching, they sped through the whole world to proclaim piety by both word and deed … . This is why the knowledge of God has risen upon the world; … this is why from all nations flocks of holy martyrs have sprung up … . (*Lives of the Monks of Palestine* 7.15–8.1)

Early Christianity does not show a significant tendency toward applying either the Great Commission or Paul's missionary sentiments to anyone beyond the apostolic generation. Nevertheless, it was a profoundly missional age. The only puzzling thing is that we don't always know how early Christianity understood or expressed its missional impulses. As Alan Kreider notes, "According to the evidence at our disposal, the expansion of the churches

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was not organized, the product of a mission program; it simply happened."[1] The staggering growth of Christianity across its first centuries is testimony that there remained a driving force of evangelism and mission working in the background. It may not have grounded itself primarily in the Great Commission, nor in statements of concern for the lost, but it must have been there, or else the rise of the Christian faith would be historically inexplicable.

There were passive means of evangelism, to be sure—the witness of daily lives lived in love and kindness, of public displays of faith and humility, which no doubt drew many to the faith—but there were also active means of evangelism at work. We have anecdotal evidence from the histories and hagiographies of early Christianity that there were people actively engaged in spreading the message of Christ to those who had never heard it before. How would the protagonists of those stories articulate their reasons for going? What were the motivating factors behind such acts? When Christians served as witnesses to the gospel of their Lord, whether to their own neighbors or to a new and distant land, what exactly were the ideas that drove such behavior? This book will seek to provide answers to those questions.

The Reign of Christ

When one reads across the spectrum of early Christianity, there emerges a picture of a young and vibrant faith which believes itself to be the earthly representation of a heavenly reality, a signpost of the way that God was breaking into the life of the world. There was an overriding conviction that an entirely new stage of history had begun, a glorious age of Christ the Priest-King's reign, and that the Christian church constituted the embassy outposts of that advancing reign, expanding its influence until it touched the very ends of the earth. It was a vision of a global Christian community, united not just in its passion for saving souls for a future heavenly existence, but for establishing churches which manifested the present reality of heaven's irruption into history.

This vision of Christian expansion is deeply rooted in the original proclamation of Jesus and the disciples as recorded in the Gospels: "the good news of the kingdom of God." The word translated as "kingdom" here, *basileia*, could more properly be rendered as "reign." Everything centered on the revelation of the reign of God through Christ Jesus, revealed in the events of his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Christians held the conviction that their master Jesus now participated in the reign of God, thus

1 Kreider, *Patient Ferment*, 9.

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making it, at the same time, the reign of the messianic king.[2] It was this idea of the present reign of Jesus, demonstrated and sealed in his earthly ministry, which drove much of the missional expansion of the early church.

To understand how this worked, we need to spend some time teasing out exactly what early Christians understood regarding this idea of the reign of Christ. For many modern western Christians, the proclamation of "the kingdom of God" seems like a puzzling notion, perhaps just a vague metaphor of the salvation that would be offered through Jesus. We are so inclined to hear the message of the gospel through the lens of its later applications, focusing on the individual need for the forgiveness of sins, that we've lost some of the scope and grandeur of Jesus's initial proclamation.

For the past century and a half, New Testament scholars have noted just how different the Protestant articulation of the gospel is when compared to the message preached by Jesus. Somehow, a message of the reign of God was transmuted into a gospel about individual salvation through the forgiveness of personal sins. The blame for this transition is often laid at the feet of the apostle Paul, who is accused by the revisionist wing of biblical scholarship of inventing a whole new kind of Christianity than what Jesus intended. Such a view, however, is deeply short-sighted. Many scholars are now realizing that Paul's message was intertwined with Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom, and that the classic idea of salvation by faith alone, as derived from his epistles, ought probably to be understood more in the sense of faith as *allegiance* rather than as simply *intellectual assent*—and allegiance is a kingdom idea.

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Rather than saying that Paul took Christianity in a whole different direction, it would be better to say that Paul explained Jesus's gospel in its applications to the expansion of the faith from Jewish to Gentile circles. The western tradition, long enmeshed in an individualist rather than a communal culture, took Paul's applications and understood them in the context of each individual's life: salvation thus becoming a matter of the personal forgiveness of sins. This doesn't mean that western Christians have been reading Paul wrong, any more than Paul was reading Jesus wrong. My personal salvation certainly is a matter of God's grace forgiving my sins

2 See Dunn, *Did the First Christians?*, 103.

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