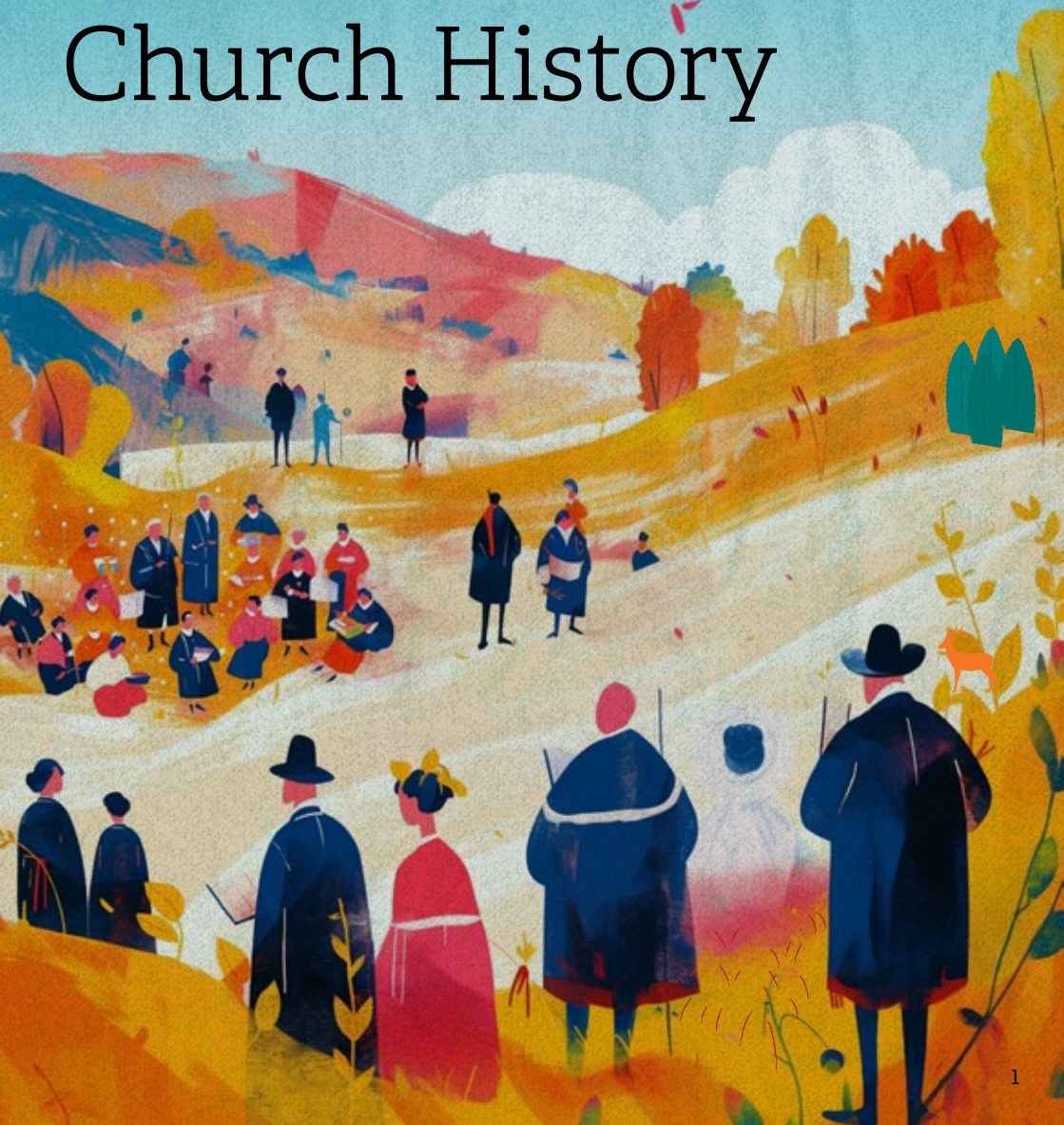




Mobilization Foundations



Mobilization and Church History



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When discussing the history of Christian missions, the focus is usually on the era in which William Carey sparked missionary efforts. This is generally described in evangelical circles as the Era of Modern Missions. So what were the mission efforts of the church before modern missions? Let us look at some of the mission efforts of the centuries after the early church was born, leading up to the era of modern missions.

As we do so, we will look at some lessons we can learn from church history, examining some of the reasons why missions languished and flourished through church history. Although this is not a detailed and comprehensive look at history, it will hopefully encourage you to research and explore more on your own.

¹ For mobilization in biblical history, do refer to Chris Wright's "Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission"





Era of Medieval Mission

This era, after the initial burst of early church growth, is not as well-documented as that of more recent centuries. During this period, Christianity went from being a despised and hated minority religion to being wholeheartedly embraced by the Roman Empire. It became an integral part of the establishment – the establishment whose commitment to the cause of Christianity grew to the point of misguided missionary zealousness.

With the church allied with the State, and the increasing power of the Popes and priests who continued to desire for Christianity to spread – it is not surprising to see how missionary zeal can go wrong. The Crusades were a product of this deadly mix of religious fervor and political ambition, and an era of brutally misguided missionary zeal. This alliance of church and state led to the use of deadly military force in pursuit of its goals, and its legacy has done long-lasting harm to the cause of Christ. Though it must be said that for those who joined, this was their way of demonstrating committed obedience.

However, many fervent Christians did not join the Crusades, but instead chose the monastic life. Although as with any human institution, the monastic movement had its own excesses, it had a positive legacy in terms of spirituality and scholarship and even in missionary efforts. In fact, Celtic monks contributed significantly to the spread of the gospel in western and central Europe.

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Long before The Crusades' tragic missionary efforts, those who chose to live the monastic life did so in response to the growing moral decay and secularism of the church. Missions was not the main concern at this point but as people sought God in solitude, meditated on Scripture and pursued what they believed was a lifestyle more in line with what Jesus has called His followers to live, different fruits were born. One of which was missionary efforts. There were monks who travelled great distances to spread Christian teachings, living out the Gospel and winning converts among people from all walks, including powerful rulers. Some of the more well-known missionaries that came out of this movement were Patrick to Ireland, Columba to Scotland and Cyril to the Slavs. It may be that in their commitment to the radical life that included the study and the life-application of Scripture, reaching out in missions became a natural outflow. Their monastic life also prepared them to be effective missionaries who were resilient, equipped to teach Scripture and credible, with their lifestyles reflecting their radical faith.

Furthermore, the monastic structures can also be credited in the spread of Christianity. Ralph Winter called these the sodalities – *vis a vis* modalities which he uses to refer to the church. Winter defines modalities as “a structured fellowship in which there is no distinction of age and sex, while a sodality is a structured fellowship in which membership involves an adult second decision beyond modality membership, and is limited by either age or sex or marital status.”

These monastic structures or sodalities are not tied down as a diocese would be. Thus, the monks were freed up (and at times commissioned by bishops) to spread Christianity in various far-flung areas. Winter provides the example of Gregory, the bishop of a diocese in Rome who called Augustine to plant a diocese in England.





Reformation Era: Reluctance to Mission Efforts

The Reformation started with the movement that broke away from the Roman Catholic institution. It was a breakaway in every sense of the word — with the Reformers extricating themselves from everything associated with the Roman Catholic institution — from the foundational theological issues to the worship forms. This rejection included the sodality structures (i.e. the monasteries). The Reformers operated without sodalities or anything similar to it until William Carey was sent out in 1793. This means that from the start of the Reformation in 1517 to 1793, when William Carey sailed off to India, there was no intentional mission efforts – that is almost three centuries of no institutional missions endeavor!



As the Reformers focused on establishing themselves in their local areas, the Roman Catholic Religious orders — the Benedictines, Carmelites, Augustinians, Franciscans and Dominicans — through their structures, played a central role in the expansion of Roman Catholicism. These structures were absent in the fledgling Protestant church. In fact in the regions where the Reformers were in control, these orders were abolished with no consideration of their value or for creating similar structures to replace them.

The Protestant church grew steadily for the next two centuries. However, church leaders during this period had little interest in cross-cultural mission

work. Historians and theologians have identified different reasons for this:

- They were too absorbed in theology and the study of Scripture, wanting to ensure firm Scriptural principles for their movement.
- They understood the missions mandate to be solely the Apostles' responsibility.
- The regions where the Protestant church was strong were landlocked and had no access to foreign lands.

On the whole though, a general reluctance to take on missionary efforts prevailed – even among those who admitted that missions is the church's responsibility. Ulrich Zwingli, the famous Swiss Reformer was quoted to



have said “if in the present time messengers are willing to go at their own risk beyond the bounds of Christendom, they ought to be certain that they have the call of God to their mission” but tellingly says nothing about the church’s responsibility towards missions. Martin Bucer, another Reformer who had a similar view to Zwingli also shared the same reluctance; when writing about Christian missions responsibility he concludes, “Christians require to do nothing else than what they have done hitherto; let everyone occupy his station for the gospel, and the kingdom of Christ will grow.”

There were a few exceptions, like Baron Justinian Von Weltz. Von Weltz proposed the establishment of a missionary structure — which as mentioned earlier was absent in the Protestant church — and training centres. He faced strong opposition by the institutional leaders. Labelled a “religious fanatic,” Von Weltz’s proposal was rebutted by a scholar named Johannes Ursinus in a stunningly prejudicial manner:

(1) The conversion of the heathen is such a difficult task that few people will be found to undertake it. (2) The heathen are so depraved that there is little hope of converting them. “The holy things of God are not to be cast before such dogs and swine.” (3) There are plenty of Jews and heathen at home to whom we should first bring the gospel before going to the pagans in far-off lands. The God-given call is: Remain at home! (4) Almost invariably, some Christians will be found in every heathen territory. It is their responsibility, not ours, to make the Gospel known in their non-Christian surroundings.²

To be fair, there were a handful of missions efforts evident during this era. Calvin sent missionaries back to homeland France, Huguenots to Brazil. Baron Justinian Van Weltz himself, having realized he was unable to persuade the church leadership – decided to go out as a missionary himself to Surinam.

² Thomas Coates, “Where the Reformers Missions-Minded?” <https://scholar.csl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4751&context=ctm>

Revivals birth Missions

As the Reformation movement focused on establishing itself, it became more and more institutionalized. With the

integration of church and state, it also became very politicized.

In terms of the Reformation movement, the focus was mainly on academic pursuits. Theologians and pastors were more concerned about doctrinal disputes than spiritual growth and transformation. In the midst of spiritual apathy, spiritual awakening was sparked through the Pietist movement. Philip Jakob Spener and August Hermann Franke, were distressed at the state of the church and reached out to students at the University of Leipzig, highlighting the priority of devotion to Christ rather than academic theology. Revival broke out, which upset the religious authorities. With the Reformation no longer a movement and becoming more institutionalized, politicized and focused on theological scholarship, spiritual apathy set in. The Pietists were far from apathetic. Their desire for spiritual transformation meant challenging the status quo. Despite the fierce resistance to the Pietist movement, it continued to grow and flourish.

An increasing awareness of the Christian's missionary responsibility came as Spener called for spiritual renewal within the Lutheran church. King Ferdinand IV, who was deeply influenced by the Pietist movement, requested that missionaries be sent to a colony in India (Tranquebar). Another man influenced by the Pietist movement, Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf became instrumental in starting one of the greatest mission movements in Christian history: The Moravian Missionary Movement.

This started a century before Luther stepped up as a Reformer in Western Europe. John Hus, a Czech theologian from Moravia, was already advocating church reform long before Luther and was martyred for this cause. His persecuted followers found refuge with a fervent Pietist aristocrat in Austria – Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf.



In 1722, Count Zinzendorf had provided sanctuary for the Moravian brethren. Other persecuted Christians continued to arrive at his estate. A Christian community was born under his godly, gifted leadership. The Moravians famously started a prayer movement that lasted a hundred years. Not unrelated to this, missionary zeal was ignited, and church planting was initiated far and wide, from Greenland to South Africa. Within this Moravian community-church, one in every sixty members were sent to serve as missionaries overseas. Zinzendorf's vision for the Moravian church was that it be a powerful instrument for renewal, unity and missions within the larger universal church. This it surely was.



Pioneering Strategic Mission

At the end of the 18th century, God raised up another pioneer. In 1792, William Carey developed a heart for missions not through any encouragement from the mainstream Protestant institution but through what he read, including Captain Cook's Voyage, the diaries of David Brainerd. More profoundly, the Scriptures convinced him that the Great Commission was true not only for the apostles in Jesus' time but also for the church in his day. Despite a growing awareness of missions through the ministry of Whitfield, Edwards and the Wesley brothers, the churches during Carey's era were generally inward looking and oblivious to their responsibility to carry the Gospel beyond their borders.

His growing burden to reach the lost led him to start discussions on the church's responsibility for the missions mandate. It was not received well. In one particular meeting, he was famously told off by the presiding officer, "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine."



Despite this, Carey persevered in working things out within the resistant church leadership, bringing up the subject of missions at every opportunity. Much later and with the encouragement of some sympathetic colleagues, he published his now-famous missionary manifesto as a clear proposal to how the church can fulfill its missions mandate. Called "An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens," this five-part work provided impetus for the development and growth of what is widely known today as the modern missions movement. It remains influential in missions thinking and strategy today due to its thorough treatment of organized mission, including:

- theological basis for missionary activity, showing that the command of Jesus to make disciples in all the world remains binding on Christians.
- a history of missionary activity, beginning with the early church.
- pages of tables that listed area, population, and religion statistics for every country in the world at the time of publication.
- responses to objections to sending missionaries, such as the difficulty of learning new languages and danger to life.
- the need for missionary societies/structures, and the practical means by which a missionary society could be supported.

This document, as well as a convicting sermon Carey preached where he famously exhorted the people to "expect great things from God and attempt great things for God," finally convinced the Baptist leaders to consider starting mission efforts. It was not without fear or hesitation at how great a task this was, but it was a promising start.

Carey's manifesto, combined with some crucial developments like Protestant nations becoming world powers, and the spiritual revivals sparked by the ministries of George Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards and the Wesley brothers, generated an outburst of missionary activity.

In the next 32 years, twelve missionary societies were born. Still, it was not an easy or smooth process. It involved an uphill battle with church leaders of the time and many moments of despair. One of these missionary societies was the Chinese Evangelization Society, through which James Hudson Taylor first went to China. Finding the society, however, to be "small and disorganized," he resigned after only a few years.

New Ways of Organizing Mission: CIM and the Student Volunteer Movement

When Taylor return to England, he sought to educate and mobilize the British people about China's spiritual needs. He wrote a small book entitled *China's Spiritual Needs and Claims*, and founded the China Inland Mission (CIM) in 1865. CIM's distinctives were:

- Embracing the value of depending solely on God for financial provision.
- Establishing its headquarters in the mission field, insisting that decisions be made from the field rather than from the home country.
- Recruiting both men and women from the working class to become missionaries, opening the door for those who lack formal education. He deemed recruiting more highly educated, ordained ministers as much more time-consuming.

CIM became one of the first societies that was not under any denominational sponsorship and depended on God to provide for their needs. For better or for worse, this affected the relationship between churches and missionary societies that can be felt even today. Since these societies were not in any way connected to the churches, it caused some church leaders to respond negatively – seeing resources that should only go to churches now also benefiting work that was outside the church.

Despite this, Taylor worked hard in relating with churches, even though this divided his attention from the work in China. When in England, he would speak about the needs of China at church meetings and big denominational gatherings. Interestingly, these were meetings that were for “spiritual edification” rather than missions. He made such an impact that this led to invitations to speak at bigger conferences where ministers and laymen came not only from England but from other parts of Europe and America.

What was key to the impact that opened church doors for Taylor was probably his God-centered, generous spirit. Bigger than his interest for the China Inland Mission was his desire to bless others in their work as well. One such instance was when he spoke at the English Presbyterian Synod on behalf of their work in China. As Howard Taylor, his son observed, “To stimulate ministers and people to more generous support of their own Swatow mission was his object, and he rejoiced in the successful issue no

less than when gifts and prayers called forth for the Inland Mission." The deep friendships he was able to maintain with many of the church leaders of that time not only helped in giving him many opportunities to speak but also helped to keep and strengthen the trust between China Inland Mission and the churches.

Following Taylor's example, other societies were also formed: the Sudan Interior Mission, the African Inland Mission, the Heart of Africa Mission and the Regions Beyond Missionary Union, among others.

As CIM grew and became more widely known, university students began to take notice. The most prominent of these came to be known as "The Cambridge Seven," One of them was CT Studd who later founded WEC International. They were gifted and prominent young men who inspired many other students to follow suit.

This focus on students became the beginnings of what later would be called the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). The SVM was formally established in 1888, and likewise raised up hundreds of students who committed themselves to overseas missions. This generated yet more energy and fervour for the burgeoning missions movement."



A key figure in starting this movement was DL Moody, who visited Cambridge regularly to preach in evangelistic meetings and held month-long conferences. Although Moody's meetings were not exactly missions-focused, it did not take much convincing from two men, Princeton student Robert Wilder and YMCA college division secretary Luther Wishard, for Moody to make it so. Wilder was a son of missionaries to India and had effectively influenced many students to pray as well as to go to the mission field. Wishard, considered the first full-time college minister in America, was influenced into missions when he first heard of the Haystack Prayer Movement which was a missions prayer movement started 80 years before the SVM. Wishard was one of the rare individuals who, despite wanting to become a missionary himself, was convinced that it was more strategic for him to remain in the United States and help start a missionary movement amongst students.

It was Wilder, Wishard and later, John Mott who decided to officially form a team to mobilize students in different campuses. Different reasons prevented Wishard and Mott from finalizing their commitment, so Wilder ended up with John Foreman. He and Foreman became mobilization partners from 1886 to 1887, traveling to one hundred and sixty-seven schools to challenge more students towards commitment to world evangelization. The student movement continued to grow as 2,106 students committed to missions work – among these were Samuel Zwemer and Robert Speer.

Wishard was later fully used by God as he willingly remained in his home country despite his desire to go to the mission field. He toured Europe and expanded his influence significantly – casting the vision for world evangelization at every opportunity. To appreciate the full impact of his mobilization work, consider the fact that Wishard raised others to continue his legacy. He mentored John Mott who not only continued his work but even furthered it significantly, leading the SVM for thirty-two years.

With the vast scope of the work, mission needed a lot of support and ongoing mobilization, and God raised up many advocates for the task. One such mobilizer was Ralph Winter, founder of the US Center for World Missions, who fervently and controversially said, "Wouldn't it be better to awaken a hundred sleeping firemen than to hopelessly throw your own little bucket of water on a huge fire yourself?" in reference to the strategic importance of mobilization.

Some Lessons from Missions History

Spiritual vibrancy led to revival and mission movements. Love for God and His word, faith, fervent prayer, obedience, outreach – these go hand in hand. We see these repeatedly even in our brief survey of two thousand years of missions. Mobilizers cannot spark revivals as such, but they can encourage spiritual vibrancy — fervent God-centered prayer, Scripture reading and reflection, and other forms of discipleship. Mobilization is not a matter of simply passing on information — whether that be biblical, or mission facts and figures. Mobilizing involves issuing a spiritual challenge – a challenge to deeper discipleship and a heartfelt, single-minded desire to do God's will for His glory.

Movements can happen at the institutional fringes. Zinzendorf, Carey and Taylor were not mainstream leaders of institutions. God raised them up on the fringes, to promote new ideas and implement new structures. These challenged the institutions of their day. Through hard work and godly persistence, they pressed on, where possible they worked within the institution, and saw much fruit from their labours.

The refugees under Zinzendorf's care might not have been most people's idea of good missionary material. Yet in God's providence, they became one of the most enduring missionary enterprises the world has ever seen. In their first 150 years of mission efforts, they sent 2158 missionaries in all directions – the Americas, West Indies, Greenland, Surinam, South Africa and Ceylon to name a few!

Challenging institutional cultures is hard and time-consuming, but necessary. There were costs to be considered when big changes were proposed that would threaten the status quo. The same is true today – change does not happen overnight, especially institutional change. Hindrances can include spiritual dryness, preoccupation with local or personal concerns, fear of the unknown and lack of vision. Institutions are not built in a day and internal changes often take time.

Today's mobilizers work within the context God gives, building and leveraging on existing relationships and forging new ones. Even institutional resistance can be an opportunity for us to provide ways for God's people to catch His vision for missions as we approach the challenge of doing so in gracious ways.

Carey gives us a good example of how we can respond to resistance. He challenged the leaders of the Baptist denomination he belonged to not only with preaching, but he also helped them think through the structures that were needed to achieve the objectives of the church - the means of "doing mission." While mobilizers need to exhort churches and Christians concerning the need to reach the lost, we also need to address their very real fears and concerns. We need to better understand institutional cultures, and provide missions education and guidance.

Church-agency relationships are ideally collaborative. Historically, some churches sent missionaries directly to the field (as the Moravians did) while others partnered with agencies (such as BMS and CIM). It is the same today. Ideally, the church-agency relationship is characterized by synergy and collaboration – a close fellowship and partnership in the body of Christ. Both institutions are needed as they have complementary roles. Both provide resources — personnel, prayer, expertise and finance — and have been raised up by God to forward His mission purposes. Both are called by God to grow in Him, to take next steps of faith and to be courageous in living as salt and light in the world. As members of one Body, the task of mission belongs to both.

Reflection Questions

1. What role does spiritual vibrancy play in mobilization? How can we maintain our own spiritual vibrancy as we encourage others towards engaging in God's global work??



2. Which of the historical figures mentioned here inspire you the most? Why?



3. What lessons on mobilizing churches can you draw from how institutions reacted to the missions mandate throughout history?



4. Do any of the five mission lessons drawn from history surprise you? Why?



5. Think of one church you are journeying with. What are the challenges you encounter and what are some best practices you discovered as you mobilize the church?





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