

Missions Activities of the Early Church and its Implications for 21st Century Missionaries

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ABSTRACT

The early Church missions were fundamental in the spread of Christianity worldwide. This research explores a biblical overview of the mission activities of the early Church, the strategies used by early missionaries, the challenges they faced, and the implications of these activities for contemporary missionaries. The researcher adopted a historical and descriptive method. Hence, there is a need to explore the early church missions, which began with the commissioning of the apostles by Jesus Christ in 30 AD–100 AD and were characterized by the preaching of the Gospel, church planting, and the establishment of Christian communities. The missionaries employed various strategies, including contextualization, local language use, and forming partnerships. However, the study identifies the early church missions' three main challenges: persecution. Despite these challenges, the early missionaries persevered and successfully spread Christianity worldwide. Therefore, there is a need for Contemporary missionaries to learn from the early Church's example by utilizing effective strategies, such as contextualization and forming partnerships with local communities. 21st Century missionaries must be aware of the role of the Holy Spirit in their missions work and be open to the prayer, signs, and wonders that may accompany their preaching of the Gospel, and the researcher gives an elegant conclusion.

Keywords: Early Church Missions, Contemporary Missionaries

Introduction

The early church missions refer to the efforts and activities of the early Christian Church to spread the message of the Gospel beyond Jerusalem and throughout the world. The early Church was characterized by its zeal for evangelization, through holding solely to the Bible, and this led to the establishment of many communities of believers in different regions. The early church missions were inspired by the Great Commission given by Jesus Christ to his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. Various mission models, including itinerant preaching, church planting, and social engagement, marked the early church missions. The early Church recognized the importance of contextualizing the Gospel message to the cultural and religious contexts of the people they were evangelizing.

Hence, it burdens the researcher that the above principle is still relevant today for 21st-century missionaries, who will reach the unreached group and re-evangelize society with the Gospel in a meaningful and relevant way. The early Church also faced many challenges and obstacles. Some of those challenges faced by the early must be highly related to what the present missionaries face today in their missions endeavor. However, they persevered and remained faithful to their mission, ultimately spreading the Gospel message worldwide. This paper investigates the early Church's holistic missions and their implications for the 21st-century missionaries who are saddled with the responsibility of world evangelization.

Biblical Centrality of the Gospel as Basis for Early Church Missions

Early Church modeled their integrated mission through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who, using the words of Isaiah, defined his holistic mission in Luke: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who

are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19^{ESV}). Jesus was sent to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom from physical, sociopolitical, and spiritual bondage.¹ His mission included a proclamation of the good news (Evangelism), compassion, and social justice. The four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John portray Jesus as the sent one. "Sending" was an important element in the Old Testament picture of mission.

Jesus was sent by God with a purpose to save the world (John. 3:16), to do God's will (John 4:34), teach in synagogues, preach the good news, and heal people (Matthew 9:35-38), suffer on behalf of his people (Mark 8:31). God sent Jesus (John 15:26), after resurrection Jesus returns to God and sends the Holy Spirit to his followers (John 15:26). In the power of Holy Spirit Jesus sends his disciple into world to do what Jesus did on earth (John 20:21-22, Acts 1:8, Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-18, Luke 24:47). Therefore, it is evident that in His ministry Jesus both went about teaching and preaching (Matthew 4:23, 9:35) and went about doing good and healing (Acts 10:38). Early churches had implemented these missions. They lived with the same principle of integral missions. Therefore, the proper way to study the Bible should be "messianically and missionally."² Throughout the history, one can see churches participating in mission of the One Triune God who desires "the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:2), with a new humanity "measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13) and "wholly devoted to doing God's will" (Col 4: 12).³ The 21st century

¹ A. Scott Moreau, *Introducing World Mission: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 47-48.

² Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narratives*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006),30; Wright uses the word Missional rather than Missiological because Jesus was not only offering a fresh theological reflection on Scriptures but also committing his disciples to the mission.

³ Gerald H. Anderson, in "Missiology," <http://mis.sagepub.com/content/1/1/3.full.pdf+html> Accessed August 21, 2023.

missionaries should emulate the early missionary in spreading Christ through making Bible the basis of her theology.

Strategies the Early Church Used in Their Missions Activities

This session will discuss five major strategies the early Church employed amidst several strategies in their missions work to spread the Gospel throughout the ancient world.

Personal Evangelism The early Church relied heavily on personal Evangelism, with believers sharing the Gospel with their friends, family, and acquaintances. This approach was particularly effective in the early stages of the Church's growth when no established churches or formal structures existed. Green argue that personal Evangelism was one of the most effective strategies used by the early Church in spreading the Gospel. He notes, "it is almost certain that the church would not have grown as fast or as effectively as it did if individual members had not taken personal responsibility for evangelism."⁴ Darrell Guder, in his book "Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America", emphasizes the importance of the early Church's personal evangelism strategy. Guder notes that the early Church's growth was largely due to the efforts of individual believers sharing the gospel message with others in their communities.⁵

House Churches The early Church often met in homes, with believers gathering for worship, fellowship, and teaching. These house churches provided a safe space for believers to grow and share the Gospel with others. Paul Pierson notes that house churches were particularly effective in reaching people in the early church context. He writes, "House churches provided an

⁴ R. Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*. Wipf and Stock Publishers (2011), 93

⁵ Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 49

ideal setting for early Christian Evangelism and discipleship. They were small, personal, and flexible."⁶ John Mark Terry and J.D. Payne suggest that the Early Church had a holistic approach to missions that included Evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and social action. They state that "the early Church proclaimed the Gospel through preaching, teaching, miracles, and personal witness. They also planted churches, trained leaders, and ministered to the poor and needy."⁷

Traveling Missionaries The early Church also sent out traveling missionaries to establish churches and spread the Gospel in new areas. These missionaries often traveled in pairs, as Jesus had instructed the apostles in Luke 10:1-12. Ralph Winter emphasizes the importance of traveling missionaries in the early Church and their role in establishing new churches. He writes, "The traveling evangelist was a key factor in the initial spread of the gospel and the founding of churches."⁸ He further, notes that Paul's missionary journeys were characterized by his willingness to learn local languages and customs, and his emphasis on empowering local leaders.⁹ The researcher is of the opinion that present missionaries learn from the early missionaries and their methods for effective Gospel proclamation.

Contextualization: The early Church also sought to contextualize the gospel message to different cultures and languages. For example, when preaching at the Areopagus in Athens, the apostle Paul spoke to the Greeks about their own poets and philosophers (Acts 17:16-34). Kraft stresses the importance of contextualization in the early Church and suggests that contemporary missionaries should follow their

⁶ Paul E. Pierson, *The Dynamics of Christian Mission: History Through a Missiological Perspective*. Baker Academic, (2009), 61

⁷John Mark Terry and J.D. Payne, eds., *Missionary Methods: Research, Reflections, and Realities* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 1.

⁸ Ralph D. Winter, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*. William Carey Library, (2009), 81

⁹ Ibid,

example. He writes, "The early Christians effectively contextualized the Gospel into their day's religious and cultural systems. We must do the same."¹⁰ Hesselgrave avers the early Church's contextualization strategy was critical to its success. He argues that missionaries today must also strive to contextualize the gospel message effectively to communicate it to people from different cultures and backgrounds.¹¹

Miracles and Signs: The early Church also used miracles and signs to authenticate the gospel message and draw people to faith. These included healings, exorcisms, and the speaking of tongues. McGavran suggests that the use of miracles and signs was a critical factor in the growth of the early Church. He writes, "The use of miracles as signs and confirmations of the gospel was a common and expected practice in the early church, and it continues to be so in many parts of the world today."¹² According to Bosch, the Early Church's strategy was to "proclaim the gospel to all nations, baptize those who responded in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and then teach them to obey everything that Jesus had commanded."¹³

Challenges the Early Church Missions Encountered

There were several challenges that the early church missions encountered, for the researcher limits itself to summarizing the challenges they encountered. Persecution and Martyrdom Haykin, avers that the early Church faced persecution and martyrdom from both the Jewish and Roman authorities, making it difficult for them to carry out their evangelistic

¹⁰ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Orbis Books, 1979) 31

¹¹ David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000),

¹² Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*. Eerdmans, 1990), 78

¹³ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 96.

activities.¹⁴ Kreider, asserts that the challenge of persecution and martyrdom hindered the Gospel's spread and discouraged many early believers.¹⁵ The next is the referred Cultural and linguistic barriers, The early Church had to navigate cultural and linguistic barriers as they took the Gospel to different parts of the world. Sanneh, affirms that the early Church had to learn new languages and adapt to new cultures to communicate the Gospel effectively.¹⁶ This made it difficult for missionaries to communicate the Gospel effectively to different peoples and nations.¹⁷

The early Church faced resistance from religious and political leaders who were threatened by the growth of Christianity. This often led to persecution and suppression of the Church. The challenge of opposition from political and religious leaders who perceived Christianity as a threat to their power and influence.¹⁸ The early Church did not have access to modern technology and transportation systems, which made it difficult for them to travel long distances and spread the Gospel to remote areas. The challenge of inadequate resources and support for missions work which limited the reach and impact of early missionaries.¹⁹

The early Church often had limited financial resources to support their missionary endeavors. This is evident in the

¹⁴ Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelization of Europe, 400-1050* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), 14-23

¹⁵ Alan Kreider, "The Early Church and the Mission of God," *Missiology* 34, no. 1 (January 2006): 9-22.

¹⁶ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 5-24.

¹⁷ Lamin Sanneh, "The Early Church and the Challenge of Translation," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 25, no. 4 (October 2001): 154-157.

¹⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996).

apostle Paul's appeal for financial assistance in his letter to the Romans (Romans 15:22-33). Mark 6:7-9 - Jesus sent out the twelve apostles with no money, bag, or extra clothing, telling them to rely on the hospitality of those they met. Acts 3:6-7 - Peter and John encountered a beggar who asked them for money. Peter replied, "I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give you." Acts 4:32-37 - transportation options, which made it difficult for them to travel and spread the Gospel. This is evident in the apostle Paul's frequent use of walking and sailing in his missionary journeys (Acts 20:13-38).

The early Church also had to deal with theological controversies and debates, such as the nature of Christ, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the relationship between faith and works. They also faced internal conflicts and divisions, such as the split between the Eastern and Western churches, which sometimes hindered their mission work. There was another challenge of syncretism, which is the blending of different religious beliefs and practices. This made it difficult for the early Church to maintain the purity of the gospel message. The challenge of syncretism which led to the blending of pagan beliefs and practices with Christian teachings.²⁰ The early Church recognized that their mission work was not just a physical effort but also a spiritual one. They faced spiritual warfare and demonic opposition, which required prayer and spiritual discernment.

Missions of the Early Church its Implications to contemporary Missionaries

The missions of the early Church have significant implications for contemporary missionaries. The significance of contextualizing the Gospel: The early Church contextualized the gospel message to the various cultures and contexts in which they ministered. This approach is still relevant today, as

²⁰ Ralph D. Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12, no. 3 (July 1988): 104-110.

contemporary missionaries should seek to communicate the Gospel in culturally appropriate ways.²¹ The early church missionaries effectively spread the Gospel by contextualizing their message to the cultures and languages of the people they were ministering to. Similarly, contemporary missionaries should contextualize their message and methods to the cultures and languages of the people they are evangelizing.²² As missionaries get involved in personal Evangelism and corporate evangelization of the world

The need for Effective cross-cultural Evangelism, The early Church was committed to taking the Gospel to all nations, which should also be a priority for contemporary missionaries.²³ The early church missionaries were effective in Evangelism because they were committed to sharing the Gospel, engaging with the culture, and living out their faith in word and deed. Perkins asserts that "Evangelism is not fast talk aimed at gaining converts; it is a ministry in *word and deed* that leads people to the place where they can activate their faith in the person of Jesus' for themselves. Jesus never put evangelism and social action at odds, so neither should we."²⁴ Meanwhile, 21st-century missionaries should learn from their example and strive for the same level of commitment and effectiveness. One could see the early church missions adapting to the people's culture. Cultural Adaptation: As the early church missionaries did, contemporary missionaries must adapt their message and

²¹John R. Franke, "The Church in Mission: A Theology of the Missional Church," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 33-50.

²² Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 55-63.

²³ Michael Goheen, "The Church's Mission and Ours," in *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and Issues*, ed. Michael W. Goheen (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 59-74.

²⁴J Perkins, *Beyond Charity: The Call To Christian Community Development*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 83.

methods to the cultural and religious contexts they encounter.²⁵

The role of the Holy Spirit in missions: The early Church relied heavily on the Holy Spirit for guidance and power in their mission work.²⁶ 21st Century missionaries should likewise depend fully on the Holy Spirit's guidance and power as they engage in cross-cultural Evangelism. Christy quoted Harold Lindsell that the Two major obstacles facing those who seek to reassert the Holy Spirit's role in missions are the human tendency toward self-reliance and ecclesiastical bureaucracies, which inhibit one from following any guidance of the Holy Spirit, which breaks policy.²⁷ These two obstacles must be overcome so that missions, empowered by the Holy Spirit, can occur. The early church missionaries relied heavily on the power of the Holy Spirit in their evangelistic work for authentic conversion and harvest of souls for the Kingdom.

The importance of community: The early missionaries recognized the need to learn the language, customs, and values of the people they served to effectively communicate the Gospel's message.²⁸ By showing respect for the community's culture and traditions, the missionaries were able to build trust and establish credibility with the people they were serving. Another lesson is the importance of meeting the physical needs of the community. The early missionaries recognized that people's physical needs often had to be addressed before they would be receptive to spiritual teachings. They, therefore,

²⁵ Roland Muller, *The Messenger, the Message, and the Community: Three Critical Issues for the Cross-Cultural Church Planter* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 31-42.

²⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 159-181.

²⁷ Mark W. Christy, "The Role of the Holy Spirit In Missions from a Biblical Perspective" Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary *Ph.D Dissertation*. 2009), 6

²⁸ A. F. Walls, *The missionary movement in Christian history: Studies in the transmission of faith*. Orbis Books. (1996),

engaged in various forms of social and humanitarian work such as providing medical care, education, and economic empowerment. This approach not only helped to improve the well-being of the community but also helped to create an environment in which the Gospel could be shared more effectively. The early Church placed a high value on community and fellowship, which was evident in their mission work.²⁹ Contemporary missionaries should likewise prioritize building relationships with the communities they serve.

The need for Perseverance: The early Church faced significant challenges in its mission work, including persecution and opposition.³⁰ Contemporary missionaries should likewise be prepared to face challenges and endure difficult times. The early Church faced significant opposition and persecution from religious and political authorities. Contemporary missionaries in Africa may also face opposition and persecution, but they can take heart from the example of the early Church and persevere in their mission work.³¹

Need for Indigenous Leadership: The early church missionaries empowered and trained local leaders to carry on the work of Evangelism and discipleship. Contemporary missionaries in Africa should also prioritize the training and empowerment of indigenous leaders, as they are key to the long-term sustainability of the Church.³² Paul argues that this requires the involvement of indigenous leaders who deeply understand their own cultures and contexts. He believes that indigenous

²⁹ Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen G. Burnett, eds., *Christians in the Twenty-First Century*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 45-63.

³⁰ Everett Ferguson, *Church History, vol. 1: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 160-185.

³¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 36-48

³² John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 97-105.

leadership is critical in helping to bridge the gap between the gospel and local cultures.³³

Discipleship: The early Church emphasized the importance of making disciples, not just converts.³⁴ This call to discipleship is still relevant today; as contemporary missionaries seek to not only evangelize but also disciple new believers. Bosch, asserts that discipleship is key to the growth and maturity of new believers, and is essential for the establishment of healthy, sustainable churches.³⁵ The contemporary must seek to disciple the people they are contacting; otherwise, their efforts may yield no result.

Partnership: The early church missions were sustained by prayer and support from the sending churches and their communities. Contemporary missionaries should seek to establish partnerships with churches and communities to sustain their missions.³⁶ Alawode, argues that the early Church was successful in its mission work because it could form partnerships with other churches, individuals, and organizations to support its work.³⁷ He further suggests that contemporary missionaries can learn from the early Church's partnership approach by cultivating relationships with local communities, empowering local leaders, and collaborating with

³³ P. G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Baker Academic. (1985).

³⁴ Darrell L. Guder, "Missional and Evangelical: A New Partnership in Evangelical Theology," in *Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. Timothy C. Tennent (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 225-240.

³⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 361-72.

³⁶ Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2010), 255-63.

³⁷ Akinyemi O. Alawode, "Challenges and prospects of partnership among local and foreign Christian missionaries in Nigeria." *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 3 (2020) 1-9

other organizations. He further argues that partnerships are essential for sustainable and effective missions and that missionaries must intentionally build these relationships.³⁸

Prayer, Signs, and Wonders The early church missionaries were often accompanied by praying together. Ryken says, “The first Christians were always getting together to pray, especially in times of uncertainty or persecution. Prayer was part of their daily routine, privately and in public worship at the temple. They prayed because they understood that they could accomplish nothing without the work of God’s Spirit.”³⁹ Signs and wonders is an authentication of the message of the messengers. While this is not always the case for contemporary missionaries, they can still seek to demonstrate the power and truth of the Gospel through their lives and ministries.⁴⁰ However, it is essential to note that signs and wonders should never be the sole focus of Christian missions. The message of the Gospel must remain central, and signs and wonders should serve as a confirmation of the message rather than a replacement for it.⁴¹ Furthermore, signs and wonders should never be used to manipulate or exploit people. They must always be exercised in love and humility to glorify God.

Conclusion

This work has attempted to investigate the missions of the early Church and its significant implications for contemporary missionaries. By looking at the example of the early Church, their concept of missions, and the strategies that empowered them to carry out their missions activities, coupled with the

³⁸ Ibid,

³⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *City on a Hill Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st century*. (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 2003), 27

⁴⁰ Craig S. Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics: Reading Scripture in Light of Pentecost* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 270-78.

⁴¹ Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 152-153.

challenges they encountered at the cause of evangelizing the Gospel message and implications to contemporary missionaries. The research argued that the early missionaries prioritized mission's effort in training and empowering local leaders, holding to the Biblical tenets as they contextualized their message and methods to the cultures and languages of the people they were ministering to, and relied on the power of the Holy Spirit for guidance and empowerment. As they face opposition and persecution, missionaries can take heart from the example of the early Church and persevere in their mission work, knowing that God is with them. Therefore, contemporary missionaries can work towards establishing healthy, sustainable churches that will continue to grow and thrive long after they have left through following the footprint of the early Church's mission in reaching all nations.

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