

Theology of Mission in a Changing World - Overview

The Great Commission

“Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’ ” (Matthew 28:16-20)

We are committed to world evangelism. However, the “look and feel” of the world Christian movement and society are constantly changing. We are influenced by:

- explosion in world population
- political changes, actors and events
- economic circumstances
- cultural differences and developments

Global outreach, church life, governance structures, denominational affiliations and doctrinal distinctives vary from one place and time to another. We need to understand the issues and the trends, to enable us to interpret the context in we are all living and working for Christ.

Demographic Trends

World historical and predicted populations (in millions)									
Year	1750	1800	1850	1900	1950	1999	2008	2050	2150
Global Population	791	978	1262	1650	2521	5978	6707	8909	9746

Source: Dr Todd Johnson, Director of the Centre for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

The average Christian family in 1913 can be represented by a European family with few children (although many European families were quite large at the time). Children went to Sunday School. In 2013, the average Christian family is much more likely to be African or Latin American, with more children. And people are increasingly living in cities.

In 2008, for the first time, the world's population was evenly split between urban and rural areas. There were more than 400 cities over 1 million and 19 over 10 million. More developed nations were about 74 per cent urban, while 44 per cent of residents of less developed countries lived in urban areas. It is expected that 70 per cent of the world population will be urban by 2050. World mission needs to focus on cities.

The Impact of Culture on Mission

From the time of the birth of the church cultural trends have influenced the nature and direction of the Christian community around the world. Members of the Body of Christ live and operate within specific cultural environments.

Ministers emerging from Bible colleges in the West today are facing age gaps of up to 50 years with their congregants or colleagues, becoming mired in disempowering governance procedures, and not having their ideas taken seriously. In addition, fewer young people choose to enter the ministry as a profession—presenting another challenge to the church. Young people in the West easily drift away from church.

Where is the Christian church headed, in terms of its day to day expression? In order to answer this question meaningfully it is important to understand our cultural setting, where we have recently come from and how events that are unfolding in the world around us will impact our identity and witness for Christ.

What is culture? It includes:

- shared history
- perceptions of the nature of government and how society should function
- common values
- language
- dress
- cuisine
- entertainment
- art and architecture
- music
- sport
- the nature of family/kinship and other relationships
- economic systems and segmentation
- political differences
- approaches to leadership
- treatment/celebration/commemoration of the stages of life
- mannerisms
- religion
- rituals

This means that expressions of the Christian message, the value of tradition and the shape of the church, even many of its operational values, vary from one culture to another. What often results is a mix of Biblical teaching, wrapped in conventions and changed to suit individuals, often with elements rusted on that have nothing to do with the Gospel, and can help or hinder proclamation and acceptance of the Message.

Our cultures define us more than we realise. We need to be aware of what cultural changes that affect us mean in practice and know how to Christ cross-culturally.

The Church Has Historically Undergone Continuous Cultural Change.

Jewish versus Gentile Culture in the New Testament

In Jesus' day, there was not a unified, monolithic "Jewish culture". The Jewish historian Josephus talks about three main schools of Judaism: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes (each of which had theological distinctives). From other sources we know of as many as 20 additional variations. Jesus encountered ethnic Jews, Samaritans, Hellenic Jews and non-Jews, Roman administrators and soldiers, Arabs. On the Day of Pentecost:

“There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:5, 9-11)

The earliest Christians had different cultures. Look at the book of Acts, which is our earliest internal record of the history of the church.

Followers of Jesus Christ were not called “Christians” until further down the road historically, in the context of the Hellenistic city of Antioch. Until then, the name that was used was a descriptive term: “the people of the Way” or “the Nazarenes.”

In Paul’s letters and the book of Acts an assumption is made that the audience is predominantly made up of Gentiles, some of whom started out as participants in Jewish culture. For example, when Paul visited Philippi, he went out on the Sabbath (the traditional Jewish day of rest and worship) to a place where people would be gathering for prayer (the small number of Jewish men in Philippi meant there was not a synagogue in the city).

The Philippians were meeting on the Jewish holy day; praying to the Jewish God, reading the Jewish Scriptures; and yet many of them were Gentiles in origin (consider also the story of the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10). These followers of Paul followed the rhythms of Jewish life; they were sometimes referred to as “God-fearers”. They were familiar with the Jewish calendar and were deriving some sort of meaning out of observing these days. Many observers took the Christian movement to be a sub-group of Judaism.

One of the greatest challenges facing Paul and others in leadership in the New Testament church was “Judaisers”, who insisted people accept Moses and become Jews ritually (including submitting to the rite of circumcision) as part of their conversion to Jesus Christ. Paul rejected the connection; it even led to an argument with the Apostle Peter:

“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified”.

(Galatians 2:11-16)

Parts of the Gentile church today still use models from Judaism/the Jerusalem church.

Relationships

Acts 2:44-46 is often quoted as the norm for Christian relationships, but these patterns (eg shared living) were generally not adopted by non-Jewish Christians. The latter were Christians in their own cultural settings.

Buildings

We have inherited the notion that God dwells in particular buildings, and sanctify those buildings. We use terms such as “going to church”, “the House of God”, or “the presence of God”, in inaccurate ways.

Rituals

Clothing worn by priests is a reminder of the Old Testament priesthood.

Mediation

The teaching that priests stand between people and God, to intercede, is widespread but is not Biblical.

Clergy versus “Laity”

Differentiating between professional clergy and the rest of the Body of Christ is not Biblical. It ends up excluding most Christians from service.

It is important not to become too legalistic, applying one cultural tradition (including ours) to others.

Many of the major splits in the Christian movement have resulted from rejection of the legalistic application of old cultures not supported by the Gospel.

There are some absolutes. In Acts 15 these centred on matters of morality and worship.

Fast Forward - brief overview of mega-trends in the 20th century:

Post Industrial, Post Modern

A little over one hundred years ago the Western world was in transition to the 20th century. Most of the globe was controlled by a handful of colonial powers and strong class structures prevailed. Aviation was in its infancy. The political structures in Europe were being challenged by Bolshevism and other winds of change. Most leaders did not believe armed conflict was imminent. Social structures were relatively sound. New political parties demanded access to wealth. The USA was isolationist. Darwinism was having an impact on thinking about the origins and nature of all things.

In Australia the economy was growing. Melbourne was the second largest city in the world, in terms of population. Roman Catholic and Protestant interests were at ideological loggerheads (reflected in the political divide, partly because of the mixed origins of European settlement and the make-up of the workforce), but Australia was generally regarded as a “Christian country”. The commitment to Empire was almost absolute.

Since then, there have been two world wars, a Great Depression (and several other major economic shocks), a protracted Cold War, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union and its satellites and client states, decolonisation (leading to the birth of dozens of new nation states), several moon and Mars landings (and exploration beyond), the Arab Spring, an information revolution and an explosion in the population of the world (linked in large part to amazing leaps forward in medicine).

The majority of scientists ever to have lived are alive today. Islam has emerged as a force in the global political economy. The global influence of the United States has waxed and waned. The world has become a global village. God has variously been declared “dead”, female and “part of every one of us”. Western countries have become much more pluralistic in make-up. The planet has become warmer. And we are in another new century.

Contemporary Christianity in the West

The shape, size and influence of Christianity in the West have changed dramatically during the past 100 years.

- In Western Europe, interest in Christianity and personal faith in Christ has fallen, and it has become perhaps the most secular region in the world, with most people being Christian in name only. For example, Spain has some 28,000 towns and villages without a single evangelical church; France is in a similar situation.
- There is less talk of “Christian countries”, even in societies with strong Judeo-Christian roots (although Civic Religion continues to be strong in the US, where the political power of Christian groups to the right on the political continuum waxes and wanes, largely in response to external threats).
- In Australia, church attendance has dropped alarmingly; many of the stereotypes that were strong just fifty years ago are disappearing, as young people (many of whom remain spiritually “aware”) look for alternative belief systems/channels, or adopt none at all.
- People who have abandoned church have not abandoned groups.
- Biblical literacy is low and most denominations in the West have chronic trouble recruiting new ministers/priests.
- Personal and financial investment in world evangelism on the part of the vast majority of Christians remains miniscule and much of the current Christian literature remains introspective.
- There is a spotlight on “mega-churches”, with very large congregations and resources, and the capacity to influence political trends and social justice.
- Tools designed to assess attitudinal research of church goers have assumed an important place in influencing the nature of church relationships and programs.
- Church hopping has become a widespread pattern, as members abandon old denominational ties (brand loyalties); cross-denominational structures are likely to increase.
- Church programs compete with sophisticated secular entertainment and support structures.
- The church must have credible responses and effective voices regarding emerging ethical issues, eg environmental degradation, global warming stem cell research
- Western churches that are able to tap into contemporary worship styles continue to be at the forefront in growth trends.

The church around the world has also undergone significant change. Christians with European backgrounds are now in the minority, but continue to have (disproportionate) access to resources. While there is an emphasis on church growth and the emergence of mega-churches, mass evangelism has largely shifted to the developing world. Rapidly changing means of communication have revolutionised the way the message is promulgated. The growth of denominations has been exponential.

Charismatic Movements

The early twentieth century was marked by the beginning of the charismatic, or Pentecostal, movement.

- On December 26 1900, a group of Christians in the United States who had been praying and reading the Bible reported that they had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had spoken in tongues. This movement rapidly spread throughout both the world, giving birth to hundreds of Pentecostal denominations, the largest being the Assemblies of God.
- Though initially separate from traditional churches (in large part due to misunderstandings on both sides), since the 1960s there have been charismatic movements in many Roman Catholic (largely in Latin America), Protestant and Orthodox churches.
- Pentecostal churches in the West are moving to more mainline forms of expression, however a number of movements, or streams (eg those with a prophetic emphasis), stand out from the majority.
- Most of the largest churches/Christian movements in the world today are charismatic or Pentecostal.

The Church in the “Developing World”

In the so-called Developing World the number of Christians has been growing exponentially.

- For the first time in history, there are more Christians in Africa and Asia than in traditionally “Christian” countries.
- This has occurred as the developing world is increasingly urbanised.
- Significant numbers of Roman Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal churches have been established in these continents, as well as many independent movements, especially in Africa (some of which are characterised by syncretism and extra-Biblical features), continue to be formed.
- As the world population mushrooms, especially in the developing world, the challenges of keeping up with evangelism are significant.
- In spite of persecution, the church in China is by far the largest Christian community in the world, and (while numbers fluctuate and are difficult to gauge) is growing rapidly.
- Translating the Bible into new languages took off in the 20th century, especially with the computer age, however there are still hundreds of dialects without any part of the Scriptures

Ecumenism

There has been a growing interest in ecumenism within many mainstream denominations in the latter half of the century.

- Several denominations joined together to form the Uniting Church, and the Catholic and Orthodox churches have discussed the possibility of restoring links.
- The World Council of Churches was formed in 1948 (however the Roman Catholic Church is not a member).
- Despite a growing hope of unity, doctrinal differences have also been growing.
- In the nineteenth century various teachings that were unacceptable to the rest of the church became official Roman Catholic dogma, including papal infallibility and the immaculate conception and sinlessness of Mary; these developments extend the formal gulf between Roman Catholics, Orthodox churches and Protestant denominations.

New Leadership Styles

21st Century Christian leadership is going to be very different (but similar to) older models.

- Denominations, home groups, house churches, virtual Christian communities, orders, and so on are witnessing ongoing re-shaping of the nature of leadership, against the background of the need for effective leaders who are godly but, at the same time, reflect what is appropriate in contemporary leadership styles.
- In some denominations, there has been a shift to team leadership, incorporating varieties of ministries and gifts; these changes have led many churches into more “corporate” structures and hierarchies, with mixed results.

Liberalism

Within the Protestant denominations there are growing gaps between “liberal” and conservative biblical beliefs.

- Liberal Christianity looks upon the Bible as a collection of narratives, or myths, that explain Christian understanding; this invariably leads to a willingness to interpret scripture without believing in its inspiration or inerrancy, and without accepting the supernatural (eg the Virgin Birth, the miracles and resurrection of Christ) as literal.

Vatican II

In 1962, Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council.

- There were both a new climate of Catholic-Protestant relationships and sweeping changes brought about by the Council, including allowing and encouraging ordinary Catholics to read the Bible, permitting the Mass to be conducted in the vernacular; and accepting that Christians could be found outside of the formal Roman Catholic structure.
- However, much of the core teaching of the Roman Catholic Church was reaffirmed.

Moral and Leadership Issues

Protestant denominations are divided on numerous social issues.

- These include whether or not to permit women to become church ministers, the acceptability of divorce/re-marriage, sexual immorality and homosexuality, particularly in ministry. The most liberal churches have emphasised tolerance and are now allowing sexual relations outside of marriage and promotion of gay priests. The unity of the world Anglican communion is under threat because of polarisation around these developments.
- In some countries Christians are continuing to debate the extent to which secular society can and should be Christianised, and the role of the church in shaping political developments.
- Moral scandals in churches (Catholic and Protestant) in the West have contributed to a growth of anti-clericalism.

Social Justice Issues

As Christians in the modern era, we are “salt” and “light” in our world. The church has a defining role in approaching the major social justice issues of the age (and must do so).

- The Christian message has practical responses to AIDS, food security, family planning, economic inequalities, repressive governments, racism, conflicts, refugees, gender imbalances, industrial relations, the rule of law, human rights and global warming.

Growth of Cults

The late 19th/early 20th century era saw the emergence of a range of cults, largely driven by millennial emphases, given concerns about international conflicts and the end of the world and questions about the capacity of traditional Christian churches to answer those concerns.

- These included the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Worldwide Church of God (Armstrongism).
- Groups such as the Moonies emerged later in the century, along with New Age and syncretistic belief systems (including the cyclical visibility of niche “churches” that combine Christian tenets with alternative philosophies and practices, such as Buddhism).
- The end of the 20th century witnessed the birth of new cults, driven by millennial concerns, and diminished influence on the part of others (eg Freemasonry).

Communism

In Eastern Europe and the USSR, Christians were persecuted by communist dictatorships, starting with the 1905 and 1917 revolutions and the USSR’s sphere of influence after World War II.

With the failure of communism in Europe, Orthodox churches began to openly flourish again, however they also created barriers to non-Orthodox churches and missionaries.

Churches in Asia (especially in China) entered periods of persecution after Communist take-overs, starting with Mao Zedong’s victory in 1949.

- Other societies under Communism/Marxism have experienced varying levels of persecution/control.
- In Latin America, Marxists tried to mix their faith with Christian tradition and Liberation Theology emerged in Roman Catholic communities, predominantly in Latin America, but was strongly opposed by Rome.

The Resurgence/Radicalisation of Islam

The 20th Century saw the resurgence, radicalisation and geographical expansion of Islam.

- This resurgence was fuelled by the decolonisation experience, economic muscle linked to rising oil prices, charismatic leadership of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Qaeda, dissatisfaction over the status of the Middle East and the promotion of high moral standards (in the context of moral decline in the West).
- The dominant vision is total global Islamisation (but schisms in the world-wide Muslim community prevail; a “civilisation of clashes”).
- Persecution of Christians in Muslim countries continues unabated (while Muslim leaders demand equality in the West).
- Some experts believe Islam will be the dominant religion in Europe by the end of the 21st century.
- The jury is still out on the effectiveness of Christian-Muslim inter-faith dialogue.

Persecution

The level of persecution and martyrdom of Christians has been higher during the past hundred years than at any other time in history.

- The principal sources of persecution have been: communism, Islam and Hinduism, as well as nationalists who have opposed links between older religions and the colonial powers.
- Countries such as Saudi Arabia still prohibit converting from Islam, on the pain of death
- Some countries (eg Russian Federation and its satellites, and Israel) ban evangelism to protect powerful indigenous religious systems.

Technological Revolutions

The past fifty years have seen exponential growth and change in communication tools and costs.

- Consider life without fast and affordable air travel, mobile phones, DVDs, mp3s, ipads, iPods, the Internet, androids, Skype, Viber, FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube (connecting people across borders and cultures) and an avalanche of cheap Christian literature.
- More information/misinformation is at our fingertips than ever before in human history.
- People living in traditionally “closed” societies can be reached with the Gospel via the Internet and satellite.

- The Christian community can operate in “virtual” space.
- There is a plethora of teaching options available to Christian leaders.
- IT is increasingly used for Bible translation, cutting years off reaching people groups.

Re-Defining The Shape of Missions

The history of missions is characterised by great successes, frustrations and failures, but the need for global witness has not diminished.

- Since the late 20th century, there has been greater emphasis on indigenous leadership, tempered by those with interests in maintaining historical models (often with greater resources), travel patterns, legal issues, access, training and the opportunities of globalisation of the Christian community, with outreach in both directions.
- There is a renewed understanding of “marketplace ministry” (Christians reaching people in their work spheres) and local missions in the West.
- Hundreds of millions of people live in countries other than those in which they were born - international migration brings traditional (including “closed”) mission fields into the heart of our society.
- Geographical boundaries are less relevant and globalisation has “reduced” the size of the world and is creating a globalised church.
- There remain billions of people who have never had the Gospel explained to them in terms they can understand.
- Mission acknowledges spiritual warfare and power encounters as never before outside the first couple of centuries of Christianity.
- A notable area of growth is missionaries emanating from the developing world. For example, the Back To Jerusalem movement, begun in China by Chinese believers, aims to send missionaries to all of the Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim peoples who live between China and Jerusalem.
- Older models of evangelism and discipleship are being re-evaluated, to ensure we are simultaneously geared to the times and take advantage of the unparalleled opportunities delivered by current and future technology, while anchored to God’s purpose and truth.

Summary

As you follow developments in world mission and trends in the global Christian movement, look for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in paradigm shifts that are taking place.

Jesus Christ *will* build His church; the form it takes and the extent to which we can be involved need to be both Biblically sound and flexible in expression.

We need to be self-aware, missions-motivated and highly strategic in our thinking, while walking in obedience to/reliance on the Holy Spirit and in partnership with the rest of the Body of Christ.