

Use of Historical Theology in Mission Research

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Why and how are the discipline and considerations of historical theology important for mission research? Mission researchers organize information and create tools that equip the Church for missions. With this aim, mission researchers and missiologists have long prized integration of multiple methods of inquiry particularly from the social sciences. History has always been a part, though mostly focused on missionary work and general historic information. Today, missionaries are working in areas with established “Christian” histories and populations, even many considered “unreached.”¹ Most fields are unique tapestries of church history that missionaries work within. Through the discipline of historical theology, missionaries can be equipped to understand and flourish within the tapestry they work among.

Historical theology, which will be defined in detail later, is usually thought of in its academic setting: bible college and seminary courses on the history of the Church. For that reason, and because this paper proposes its integration into mission research, it is important to note the place of missiology (mission studies) itself within academics. Today, debate continues among academicians as to whether missiology should be under theological studies or as a separate or chief discipline.² Though this debate is out of the purview of most mission researchers they are inevitably affected by it. Segregation of missions and theological studies, in much of academia, has limited many mission researchers’ exposure to the value of historical theology in understanding the aspects of the mission field.

The barriers to exposure also affect missionaries themselves. Often workers on the field are ill-equipped to deal with traditions different from their own Christianity, because they lack training in the historical development of various streams of the Church. Without such training, missionaries are more likely to misunderstand how their work fits among God’s overall activity in their field. They are also more likely to work independent of existing local churches. Needed, is the use of an interrelated historical theology that seeks to understand how the social and theological development of the Church in a given field shapes the unique mission tasks (what needs to be done, how to do it and whom to do it with). This paper will investigate the elements of this historical theology and how it can be used to equip the Church for missions.

¹The Joshua Project’s criteria for unreached people groups is not limited to those completely void of Christians, but includes those less than 2% Evangelical Christian and less than 5% Christian Adherents. “Joshua Project - Definitions and Terms Related to the Great Commission,” n.d., <http://www.joshuaproject.net/definitions.php> (accessed February 17, 2011).

² For a discussion of this see: Lalsangkima Pachuau, “Missiology in a pluralistic world: The place of mission study in theological education,” *International Review of Mission* 89, no. 355 (October 1, 2000): 539-555. and: David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991). An example of the academic integration of missions and historical theology can be found at Chung Chi College in Hong Kong and its professor Tobia Brandner, professor of church history and missiology who deals with missiological issues alongside of those of historical theology in this article: Tobias Brandner, “Mission, Millennium, and Politics,” *Missiology: An International Review* XXXVII, no. 3 (July 2009).

Method for the Use of Historical Theology in Mission Research

Working Definition of Historical Theology

The thesis proposed in this paper rests upon a particular definition of historical theology. Though many Christians world-wide are familiar with the concept of “church history”, many evangelicals often make a mental separation between their personal faith and its historic roots. This separation has not always existed. Why and how history in general is studied changed during the European enlightenment. Historians largely abandoned the view that history represents God’s sovereign will being carried out, and opted for a method which looks at the past as merely human action.³ This orientation to the study of history spilled over to Church history scholarship as much of the discipline became disassociated from actual confessions and spiritual lives of Christians. Today, Church history satisfies the evangelical’s curiosity, but is not viewed as essential to their personal faith.

Scholarship has separated the study of social church history and the history of doctrine. Social church history encompasses the political, economic, sociological and cultural conditions of the Church as well as its thoughts and interworking. History of doctrine looks at the development of the Church’s doctrine and related praxis, under the umbrella of theological studies. This separation emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, within higher criticism, when historiographies of the Church changed from confessional to critical.⁴ Critical analyses seek to separate the historian’s Christian convictions from his or her analysis of the history of the Church. Though many church historians are again studying both aspects simultaneously, the effect of the division continues to be felt today.⁵

The working definition of historical theology proposed in this paper will be based on the belief that social conditions and doctrine developments are interrelated aspects of God’s plans for this age. For this reason, the phrase “historical theology” is preferred over “church history” because it draws the reader’s attention to God working (theology) in history through the Church. Scholars typically view historical theology as a subset of church history or theological studies. They study the social aspects and thoughts of the church under church history, and investigate the development of the church’s doctrine within historical theology. The problem with this separation is the assumption that the Church’s doctrinal developments (the actual convictions of Christians given by God) are disassociated from her social conditions and God’s will.

³ Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume’s ousting theological interpretations of the past influenced the way Westerners approached history. Explanations of history shifted from that of God’s divine will to simply human action. See: Richard Hooker, “Progress,” *Washington State University - The European Enlightenment Glossary*, n.d., <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/GLOSSARY/PROGRESS.HTM> (accessed January 19, 2011).

⁴ James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller, *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

⁵ Though as Bradley and Muller explain, there has been a decrease in this distinction in recent years (James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller, *Church History : An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 5).

With these considerations in mind, the definition of historical theology used in this paper will be: the beliefs and practices of the world-wide Church and localized churches in their historic framework. This definition will aid an investigation of the effect of the existing Church within a mission field, whether an entire country or a village, on what missions activities are needed and how they should be carried out.

Historical Theology in Mission Research

Now that a working definition of historical theology has been developed, its use in mission research can be investigated. There are two aspects of this use. First, the Christian history of a mission field, no matter how small, informs the mission researcher as to how God previously worked and is presently working among the people. This history is in essence, data that helps the researcher understand more fully the characteristics of a field. Second, historical theology, as defined in this paper, can be used by the mission researcher to equip missionaries. In this way, the historical “data” is taken beyond understanding to application to help missionaries understand the appropriate missions goals and activities.

Christian History of the Mission Field

A great deal of missions activities occurs today in areas with established “Christian” histories and populations. Therefore, it is vitally important that those involved in these activities, either by strategizing or carrying them out, adequately understand the characteristics of churches that exist in a field. Because missions is inextricably tied to spiritual convictions not just the social or “visible” function of the Church in society, a history that explains the beliefs and practices of each stream of the Church in a field is needed.

How does one bring together a Christian history of a mission field? Whether the history of a country of 100 million or a town of 10 thousand, it can be challenging to know where to begin. The working definition of historical theology includes the practice and beliefs of both the world-wide Church and localized churches. When the historical events of localized churches are understood in conjunction with that which was occurring among the larger Church, a deeper picture is gained.

Aspects from the Broader Church

Understanding the basic progression of events that lead to the existence of the Church on a mission field is essential. An individual Christian’s faith is rooted in historical events ordained and orchestrated by God, one being Christ’s birth, burial and resurrection. These events make up what is often termed “redemptive history,”⁶ which started at the creation of the world and ends with the recreation of the heavens and earth.⁷ For that reason, the connection of each localized church with broader Church history is vital. Three aspects of the broader Church will be explored.

⁶See Edward’s work on the history of redemption for definition and explanation: Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption* (Banner of Truth, 2003).

⁷ See Revelation 21:1-8

First: the timeline. In order to bring together a Christian history of a mission field, one must consider first the basic timeline of the broader Church. Church history is typically divided into the following periods: (1) Age of the Apostles 33-100 A.D., (2) Ancient 100-600, (3) Medieval 600-1500, (4) Early Modern or Reformation 1500-1750, (5) Late Modern 1750-1900, (6) Postmodern 1900-present.⁸ A basic timeline provides a starting point to begin an analysis of field-specific histories.

Some might contend that such a division creates a bias in our analysis because it stems from events that occurred primarily in the West. Certainly history proves that some segments of Christianity spread to parts of Africa and Asia which were less affected by Western squabbles. Still, by far the majority of the Church's development, at least from the 4th-19th centuries, occurred in the West. Mission researchers should ask: how did the broader events in Church history impact the localized church among the field I am researching?

Second: streams of the Church. Another aspect that should be considered, from the broader Church, is the many ecclesiological streams of Christianity. This includes large streams, what Operation World terms "MegaBlocs", which include Catholic, Independent, Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox.⁹ It also includes divisions within these streams such as Protestant denominations. Resources such as Operation World provide a wealth of data on the current quantitative state of these streams, but a Christian history of a mission field must look deeper and wider to understand their historic border-crossing effects. Researchers should ask: how does each stream's broad history help me understand its specific occurrence on the mission field I am researching?

Third: the Church in the world. The final aspect that should be considered is the relationship of the Church to society and culture. Evangelicals, especially North Americans, have the tendency to analyze the Church apart from aspects such as the state, which can cause a misinterpretation of the historic spread of Christianity. Some aspects to consider from the broad history of the Church are: (1) relationship between church and state, (2) social and economic demographic makeup of the church, (3) cultural contextualizations of the church, (4) relationship of the church to other religions. Researchers should ask: how do the Church's historic relationships to society and culture inform an understanding of the Church among the mission field I am researching?

Aspects within the localized church

The localized church includes expressions of Christianity in a defined geographic area (mission field). Examples include the Anglican Church in West Africa and the Assemblies of God in Columbia. In studying aspects of the localized church, researchers seek to determine how streams were and are uniquely experienced. Three aspects will be considered.

⁸ Though these divisions are widely used, the exact dates vary among historians. In this paper divisions are taken from the following work: John D Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (NavPress, 2001), 28.

⁹ Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation*, 7th ed. (Biblica Publishing, 2010), XXX.

First, the basic events in the history of the Church on a field need to be brought together. Aspects include: (1) when did Christianity arrive on the field, (2) what streams have arrived on the field, (3) from what country and culture did Christianity arrive, (4) what streams have developed within the field, (5) other major events in the history of the church on the field. Researchers should ask: how does the basic progression of events in the history of the Church in a field inform my analysis?

Second, understanding the unique development of each stream of the Church on a mission field is critical. World-level publications seek to standardize categories of streams, from country-to-country. While helpful for country-to-country comparisons, the uniqueness of the stream's development in a specific mission field is often lost. Though strategizing global priorities is important for mission agencies, missionaries on the front lines work and live among small segments of the world that cannot be understood through standardized categories. Researchers should ask: how have streams of the Church uniquely manifested themselves in this field?

Third, the historic relationship between the culture and society of the mission field and the Church should be explained. As cross-cultural agents, it is important for missionaries to understand the place of Christianity within their mission field, especially as it differs from their home culture and society. The four aspects important to an analysis of the broader church are also important here. Researchers should ask: what are the unique ways the Church relates to the culture and society of the mission field?

The use of Historical Theology to Equip Missionaries

How can the history of the church in a mission field be used to equip missionaries? Great resources exist to help cross-cultural missionaries navigate their new culture and languages.¹⁰ When a missionary enters a new culture it is important for them to understand how their “ethnocentric impulse”¹¹ can affect their ability to build meaningful relationships. In the same way, missionaries must understand how their home stream and cultural expression of Christianity differs, both in doctrine and praxis, from what they encounter on the field.¹² Mission researchers can aid this understanding in three ways.

Integrating Church History into Descriptions of Fields

Descriptions of mission fields should include histories of the church. Mission agencies or individual missionaries preparing a new work in a country, city or village should depend greatly on publications which give information on the current situation. Global publications such as Operation World and the Atlas of Global Christianity, as well as regional works and websites if available¹³, are typically consulted. Published information is often

¹⁰Within the past thirty years a good number of books dealing with specific culture-crossing issues have sought to help missionaries.

¹¹ The “ethnocentric impulse” is detailed in: Craig Storti, *Art of Crossing Cultures*, 2nd ed. (Intercultural Press, 2007), 66-9.

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¹³ Helpful print and web resources are available for some countries and provinces, as in the case of the website www.missionjapan.com. Another substantial source of information includes mission agencies themselves

interpreted alongside of communication with nationals or expatriates in the field. Information from these sources is used to determine, (1) if a field needs missionaries (particularly cross-cultural), (2) which missions activities need to be attempted. Considerations from historical theology, as defined in this paper, are important to a valid answer to both questions.

First, the question of whether a defined field needs missionaries should not be determined solely from quantitative measures of how many non-Christians or least-reached peoples there are. While this data is important, it does not convey the entire picture. For example, while El Salvador is estimated to be 31.6% “Evangelical” by Operation World,¹⁴ because of its short Protestant history, the need for cross-cultural missionaries to help with theological education and other areas still exists.¹⁵ When the history of the church on a field is considered, alongside of numeric data, a fuller picture of the need is gained.

Second, mission agencies and missionaries are looking for information that helps them determine what missions activities they should attempt. Certainly there are some pioneering activities cross-cultural missionaries carry out before any churches exist. Still, most missionaries today are sent to fields with existing churches, though they might be small and or from differing Christian streams.

If the goal of a missionary is to see churches take shape, it behooves them to consider the existences, history, and theological characteristics of local churches that already exist in their field, or even those in close proximity. Researchers should seek to provide more than simply how few Christians exists on a field and a profile of the culture.¹⁶ Information on how God has historically worked through even a small Church presence on a field helps agencies and missionaries determine what their activities should be.

Understanding Missions Activities in Historical Context

Missions activities should be understood within the context of a field’s entire church history, not simply the immediate need they seek to fulfill. The segregation between missions and theological studies, specifically historical theology, has caused many to unwittingly bias the modern paradigm of how Christ’s command should be obeyed (Mt. 28:18-20). In other words, the characteristics of the modern missions paradigm, defined as the volunteer movement of

who compile formal and informal data on the people and ministries occurring on fields they work among.

¹⁴ Mandryk, *Operation World*, 318.

¹⁵ El Salvador is an example of a country of where standardized definitions such as “Evangelical” do not communicate the entire picture of the state of the church to outsiders. “Evangelical” is a theological designation signifying a denomination’s adherence to a set of doctrinal tenets. It is not a claim on how those counted “Evangelical” actually apply such tents to their personal lives and function in society. For that reason, “Evangelicals” from county-to-country can look different. When mission strategists and missionaries consider the social and doctrinal history of the denominations considered “Evangelical”, a deeper picture is gained which helps determine missions need.

¹⁶ David Bosch’s words on “rediscovering the Local Church” are helpful here. As he explains, the Apostle Paul treated even very small and new fellowships of believers as fully functioning churches (e.g. the Thessalonians). Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 378-81. This attitude is even more important today with the wide spread of Christianity. Though countries like Indonesia are considered least-reached and encompass millions of people who have no access to hear the Gospel, missions activities that do not at least consider what God has and is doing through Indonesian churches will be ill-advised.

Christians in the late 18th century to present, moving to non-Christian lands to spread the Gospel, are used to interpret the spread of Christianity throughout all of Church history.¹⁷

Further, this bias coupled with a lack of exposure to other streams of the Church can be harmful for a missionary. This is not to say missionaries must be ecumenical, but that they should be briefed on the “church culture” and history as much as they are on the broader culture. Missionaries should ask, what does it mean to “do missions” in partnership with or in midst of churches that arose in a different manner, or who have developed past a “missionary” period? This question is particularly important for Protestant missionaries in countries like Spain with long Christian histories, but also where the Protestant Reformation was never widely received. Mission researchers who provide content on the development of the Church in a field help missionaries begin to contemplate how their work goes beyond immediate impact to a contribution to the larger history of the Church.

Developing Appropriate Goals

Mission agencies and missionaries should set goals with regard to what God has been doing within a field throughout history. The complexity with goal setting is determining the most important results desired and the indicators of success. Just as a German company setting the same goals for its factories in Germany and Malaysia will be disappointed, so also will cross-cultural missionaries who import goals to the field.

A great deal of mission research in recent years has attempted to tackle this problem through teaching agencies and missionaries to develop culturally contextualized expressions of Christianity. With these expressions in mind, goals that fit the contexts can be set. Researchers should go a step further to the question of which goals are appropriate in light of the Church that already exists on a field. For example, if the only presence of the Church on a field is from a stream substantially different from the missionary’s (e.g. Eastern Orthodox vs. Baptist), activities will need to be contextualized in light of the native Church’s affect on how the broader culture views Christianity. For example, evangelism goals of Baptist missionaries in countries with Eastern Orthodox histories must take into account, not only culturally relevant communication, but also the wider population’s Orthodox-influenced view of Christianity.

Examples

What does applying the discipline and considerations of historical theology in mission research look like? This section will explore some aspects of Spain’s Christian history useful for missions there. Though Christianity has a long history throughout the Iberian Peninsula, today only 0.84% of Spain is Protestant and 1% Evangelical.¹⁸ Further, though 74.83% of the population claims to be Roman Catholic, few are actively involved in local parishes.¹⁹ A brief look at some aspects of Spain’s Christian history reveals a deeper picture of its mission context.

¹⁷ See Bosch for a detailed explanation of the historical paradigms of Mission: *Ibid.*, 181-348.

¹⁸ Mandryk, *Operation World*, 764-5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 764-5.

This investigation requires the use of appropriate resources. Every aspect of the use of historical theology in mission research requires historical references. The tendency for people in “mission” circles will be to consult mission histories and other mission-oriented publications. This tendency should be avoided, as Andrew Walls explains, “The missionary period...is only an episode...in many cases it was a very short episode, and in many others it was closed long ago.”²⁰ The history of the Church cannot be explained completely through the activities of missionaries.

In order to find useful resources, researchers should look first for published Church histories which cover the mission field of interest. Researchers should keep in mind how the divisions among church histories, both ecclesiastical (Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, etc.) and scholarly (social, doctrinal), can affect the usefulness of some works. Some church histories, covering countries such as Spain, will only cover majority streams of the Church. To obtain information on minority streams, researchers will need to search other academic disciplines, such as secular history and reports from denominations and Christian associations. These sources will also need to be consulted in fields where no published Christian histories exist. Researchers should also consult knowledgeable Christians within the select mission field for leads to other useful resources.

Major Aspects of the History of Christianity in Spain

The history of Christianity in Spain is long and complex. Certainly, most missionaries work among “mission fields” geographically smaller than an entire country. While missionaries need to be equipped with historical events unique to the specific “mission field”, the history of Christianity within the entire country is a good place to start. For example, major aspects of Spain’s Christian history will be considered. Today, the notion of a “Christian” Spain is rooted more in idealized history than contemporary practice. Missionaries who understand the ancient church history of Spain will be better equipped to comprehend modern Spaniards and the Spanish church.

Spain has been closely connected to the broader Church for centuries. According to legend, Apostle St. James (Santiago) first brought the Gospel to the Iberian Peninsula, was martyred there and was buried at Campus Stellae (Santiago de Compostela).²¹ In Romans 15:22 the Apostle Paul communicates his plans to go to Spain, but whether his plan was realized cannot be substantiated. Though the notion of either Apostle preaching the Gospel in Spain is unlikely, there is no doubt Christianity appeared early. For centuries under Roman control, Christians in Spain experienced the same persecutions the broader Church did across the Empire. Christianity in Spain was recognized as a legal religion in 312, when it was becoming tolerated throughout the entire Rome Empire. The Church in Spain has always been affected by the events of the broader Church, but has also experienced its own series of large and some heretical movements.²²

²⁰ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Orbis Books, 1996), 145.

²¹ Rhea Marsh, Smith, *Spain: A Modern History* (University of Michigan Press, 1965), 11.

²² See: “Paganism and Pagan Survivals in Spain up to the Fall of the Visigothic Kingdom,” n.d., <http://libro.uca.edu/mckenna/paganism.htm> (accessed February 15, 2011).

The Visigoths, who ruled Spain from 573-711, initially brought Arian Christianity, but later converted to the orthodox Nicene confession. During this period, the Visigoths and the Roman See worked, on their own accords, to subdue heretics notably the Priscillianists who ascribed to a form of Gnostic-Manichean Dualism. From the 711 invasion of north-African Muslims, until their defeat at Granada in 1492, Christianity was hardly tolerated in Islamic Spain. Though Christianity was installed as the sole Spanish religion by Ferdinand and Isabel in the 15th century, it was characterized more by politics than devotion, as seen in the Inquisition.

Spain in the 16th century, the “golden age”, witnessed a tremendous growth in her political power and reach. Catholic Christianity was not a casual observer. It was intermingled with Spanish political clout. During the 16th-19th centuries, to be Spanish was to be Catholic. Still, myth and legend pervade typical understandings of how “Christian” Spain truly was. Historian Henry Kamen’s invaluable work synthesizing many of these myths.²³

Though, to be Spanish was to be Catholic, actual Christian beliefs and practices were lacking or non-existent in many communities. Kamen explains:

“The apparently ‘Christian’ culture of the people of Spain between the 16th and 19th centuries left much to be desired, since both clergy and laity were equally ignorant of basic (Christian) essentials. Religion ended up as an extension of social discourse rather than a system of faith; it was, in other words, what you did rather than what you believed.”²⁴

“Formal Catholic doctrine during the Golden Age of peninsular culture represented only one part of the essentially folkloric belief of Spaniards. Religious practice was traditional and sociable rather than theological.”²⁵

Though lack of personal devotion pervaded Spain, it maintained its reputation as the “hammer of heretics.” And there were no greater heretics than Protestant Reformers. Though both the reformation and modern mission periods witnessed small inroads of Protestant streams, they were often harshly persecuted and viewed as antithetical to Spanish Catholic identity.

Recent History of Christianity in Spain

Within the last century, there has been both a resurgence of Catholic patriotism and a subsequent re-secularization of Spain. Under the Franco Regime (1936-75) a blatant and partially-successful attempt was made to resurrect an idealized Catholic practice and identity for the country.²⁶ This was attempted through state-funded measures to Catholicize many aspects of Spanish culture such as education. Though as Kamen explains, “For roughly forty years after the civil war (1936) the Spanish state took as its political ideal an imaginary 15th century regime and

²³Henry Kamen, *Imagining Spain: Historical Myth and National Identity* (Yale University Press, 2008), 74-95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶William James Callahan, “The evangelization of Franco's “new Spain,”” *Church History* 56, no. 4 (December 1, 1987): 491-503.

gave official status to the religion practiced by that regime.”²⁷ In the spirit of the imaginary idea that Spain has been pervasively Catholic since the Inquisition, Protestant churches were widely not tolerated during the Franco regime.²⁸

Today missionaries in Spain are confronted with a country which, for most of the 20th century, was taught an idealized notion that Catholicism pervaded its identity for centuries. In reality, since Christianity appeared on the Iberian Peninsula, personal Christian belief and practice among Spaniards has often been far less prevalent than Spanish politics would admit. Before Franco, criticism of the Catholic Church was wide-spread and today skepticism of the Church has reappeared in the form of secularism. Today, missionaries in Spain must take into account: first, that Spaniards have been taught to find their Spanish identity in Catholicism, but have also embraced secularism; second, that the Protestant Gospel, not simply Christianity, has long been politically and religiously rejected in Spain.

Conclusion

The importance of using historical theology within mission research lies in its ability to facilitate the understanding of missions activities within the broader context of God’s mission throughout history. Segregation of the Church into the spheres of “local church”, “theological education” and “missions” has caused many modes and methods of inquiry to be isolated. Mission researchers often do not consider historical theology because they are not oriented to its concerns. In the same way, theologians are often out of touch with missiological concerns.

Today there is a need for research that helps missionaries contextualize not only their work within culture, but also the church culture of a mission field. Missionaries who desire to bring the Gospel to those who have not heard, see that their pursuit is not attempted in isolation, but alongside pockets of the Church even within “unreached” lands. Crossing borders to share Christ is both a step into a different culture and a unique church culture and history. Mission research that incorporates an understanding of historical theology, both world-wide and field-specific, enables missionaries and mission strategists to understand how missions activities can appropriately fit into God’s historic work in their field.

²⁷ Kamen, *Imagining Spain*, 95.

²⁸ Winfred Ernest Garrison, “Religious liberty in Spain. 4, The state of Spanish Protestantism,” *Christian Century* 67, no. 44 (November 1, 1950): 1290-1293.

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