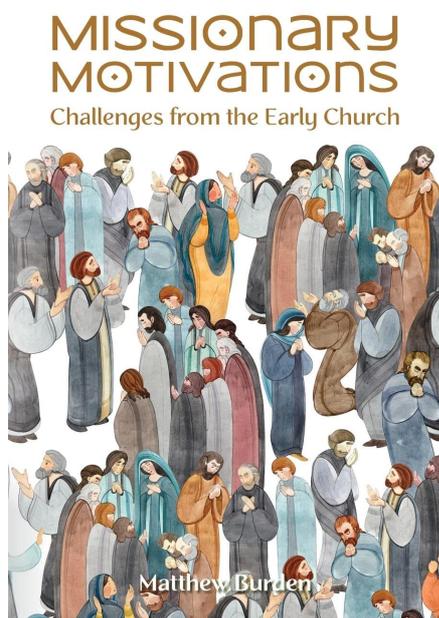


Missionary Motivations: Challenges from the Early Church

By Matthew Burden

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Summary



This book seeks to open a window “on the way that Christians in the early centuries of our faith thought about the task of global mission” (page vii). It aims to expand our understanding of mission history with a theological mindset by exploring the theologies of mission that undergirded the spread of the gospel in the patristic period (from the end of the first century into the eighth century). To do this, the author divides the book into two parts: (1) a historical survey that examines Christian expansion within the Roman Empire, then to the east, south, and north; and (2) a sustained reflection on the motivations of these historical accounts based on the theology of Christ’s present reign expressed in communal mission practice, on the theology of human identity, on the development of missional church cultures, and insights on how the early church can offer perspective to today’s mission.

Best illustration

“The first hints of the dawn of Christianity among the Visigoths come from accounts of bottom-up evangelism—namely, prisoners of war taken from Christian regions who then shared the gospel with their captors. One example of this is Euthycus, a Cappadocian (from modern Turkey) who was taken violently by the Goths and there, in their own country, he spread the seeds of the faith.” Page 62

Best Idea

“The central vision of early Christianity was that Christ the King was on his throne, and that all people could now participate in the advance of his kingdom by repenting, pledging their allegiance to him in faith, and joining in the endless cycle of worship around his throne.” Page 98

Best Take Away

"The imitation of Christ, as an all-encompassing manner of life, was a theme that arose over and over again throughout early and medieval Christianity, and its direct result was the expanding geographical reach of the gospel." Page 110

Our Recommendation

We recommend this book to missionaries, mission pastors, and missions students who seek to understand not just mission history in the early church but a glimpse of what theologies motivated early Christians to be on mission with God.

Best Quotes

"Historical missiology is a subject that sits between missiology and the history of mission, and it seeks to describe the way that earlier periods understood and articulated their principles of missiology." Page vi

"There appears to have been a general feeling (in the early church) that the Great Commission had been given to the disciples and their generation, and that disciples had fulfilled it (at least in an incipient way)... Early Christianity does not show a significant tendency toward applying either the Great Commission or Paul's missionary sentiments to anyone beyond the apostolic generation. Nevertheless, it was a profoundly missional age." Page 3

"It was this idea of the present reign of Jesus, demonstrated and sealed in his earthly ministry, which drove much of the missional expansion of the church." Page 4

"The Messiah was expected to be both a royal and a priestly figure." Page 8

"There was also a pronounced focus on salvation as Christ's victory over enemy powers. By defeating the power of Satan and shattering death's hold on us, Christ has brought us out of bondage and into the liberty of his inheritance for us, as citizens of his kingdom and co-heirs of the promises of his messianic age. This view of salvation is referred to as Christus Victor theology." Page 10

"While the Christus Victor theme has long been noted with regard to salvation theology, its influence on the theology of mission has seldom been explored. Yet these very theses—the kingship of Christ and the present reality of his active reign of conquest over the spiritual powers—stand at the center of early Christianity's conception of mission." Page 10.

"If we are officers of Christ's reign, which is even now manifested across the world, then part of the duty of the Christian is to represent that reign and facilitate this spread." Page 13

"Wandering pilgrim-monks sought to live as closely as possible to the manner of life of Jesus and the disciples, to imitate Christ not only in spiritual matters but in lifestyle as well." Page 13

"There are voluminous Christian writings from the (early) period, but very few that deal with questions of the intentionality of mission and evangelism." Page 15

"An absence of information does not necessarily denote an absence of missionary activity." Page 16

"Passive evangelism (regular actions and characteristics of the church which are in themselves, attractive to outsiders and thus a 'hook' that leads to conversion) appears to have been the more vibrant force for Christian expansion throughout most of early Christianity." Page 17

"One public practice of Christianity that is most noted in accounts of Christian/pagan contact, a practice that surprised some modern Christians: exorcism.... Often linked with miracles of healing, exorcism was perhaps the most common public presentation of the gospel." Page 22

"Demonstrations of the power of the Christian God meant conversion. Miracles, wonders, exorcisms, temple-torching and shrine-smashing were in themselves acts of evangelism." Page 23

"Christianity tended to develop deep roots in the major urban centers of the empire but faced a stiffer challenge in evangelizing the rural hinterland, where up to 90 percent of the empire's population lived." Page 27

"The earliest areas of Christian expansion (occurred in) India, eastern Syria, Mesopotamia, Armenia, Georgia, and Persia and then later expansion (occurred through) the efforts of Persian Christians into central and eastern Asia." Page 35

"If the missions within the Roman Empire were motivated by a theology of Christus Victor, the same can be said of the east, especially in the case of wandering monks.... Eastern Christianity saw itself as a movement that was both global and perpetually active." Page 45

"The areas south and southeast of the Roman Empire (Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, and north Africa) offer a puzzle to anyone seeking to understand missionary motivations. In this region, the story of Christian expansion smacks of the haphazard and the inconsistent. The spread of the gospel often seems attributable to sheer chance or to less-than-sincere motives." Page 58

"The expansion of Christianity into central Europe (the Goths, rural Gaul, the Franks) is not one of the resounding successes in the history of missions, at least not in its early stages. As in many places within the empire, the rural countryside remained relatively untouched by Christian influence for several centuries." Page 72

"In the history of early Christianity, there are only two periods in which missionary activity was so consistent and sustained as to deserve the title of 'mission movement.' One was the steady and spectacular growth of the Church of the East through Persia and central Asia, and another was the expansion of the Celtic church of Ireland and its heir, the Anglo-Saxon church." Page 75

"Patrick, the founding figure of this (Celtic) mission movement, appears to be one of the first Christians since the apostolic age to take the Great Commission passages seriously and apply them to his own context." Page 87

"Mission movements in early Christianity tended to be communal and ecclesial in aspect, driven not so much by a desired result as by a theological vision. Concepts of ecclesial and individual identity, rather than goals to be achieved, determined the shape of early Christian mission." Page 89

"Mission in early Christianity was usually done in community and to communities. However, it does not mean that the individual dimensions had no part to play." Page 101

"Some early Christian documents referred to the global Christian community as a commonwealth (oikoumene)—a practical, political term which the Roman Empire also applied to itself." Page 101

"The quest for personal holiness was seen as the frontline battlefield of God's mission in the world." Page 108

"Early Christian expansion appears to have been motivated less by Jesus' commands and more by his pattern of life, along with the inspiring vision of Old Testament prophecy, which Christians believed they were fulfilling." Page 113

"Mission, when undertaken in the spirit of early Christianity, ought to display a sense of patient confidence." Page 119

"The conflux of ideas—holiness, the imitation of Christ, the meaning of worship, the centrality of the church, and so on—is all bound up in a grand theological vision of Christian identity in the in-breaking kingdom of God." Page 125

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