

The church as the place and means of mission in early Christianity: what four fathers of the global church teach us

Edward L. Smither, PhD, Columbia International University

Introduction

Though the term “missions” does not enter Christian vocabulary until the sixteenth century when the Jesuits coined the term to describe their activities, mission has always characterized the church. That is, proclaiming the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus across barriers of culture and belief has been evident in the history of the church though the fervor for mission has, of course, varied at different points in the story. One important element to consider is the means or structures for mission. Following the rise of modern mission movement in the nineteenth century, the primary vehicles of Protestant mission to the world were missions societies. Among medieval Roman Catholics, the key structures were monastic missionary orders that included the Franciscans, Dominicans, and later the Jesuits.

What were the means and structures of mission in early Christianity, particularly between AD 100 and 500? In this paper, I will argue that the church itself—expressed in local communities and networks of communities—was the primary locus of mission. Aided by preaching, catechism, liturgy, good works, and cultural engagement, and fueled by some church leaders who championed all of the above, the church itself was the primary missions society in the first five hundred years of Christianity. This paper will conclude that in the early church, there was never a church-less Christianity or a mission-less church.

Mission, Missionaries, Intercultural Contexts

Following William Larkin, I define mission as “The divine activity of sending intermediaries . . . to speak or to do God’s will so that God’s purposes for judgment or redemption are furthered.”¹ While redemption is certainly the hope of the missionary proclaiming God’s ways, judgment is also a real outcome for those who reject the gospel. Emphasizing the scope of mission, Ott, Strauss, and Tennent helpfully add that “Mission is a sign of the kingdom and an invitation to the nations to enter the kingdom and share the hope of the kingdom promised in Christ’s return.”²

Mission, which simply means “sending,” is founded upon the *missio Dei* (mission of God). That is, the initiative for mission begins with a missionary God. This reality is perhaps best captured after the fall when the living God himself moves toward the fallen couple and asks Adam, “where are you?” (Gen. 3:8ff) and then provides sacrificial covering for their shame. This pattern of sending continues throughout the Old and New Testaments as God sends his servants and messengers—prophets, the Messiah, and the church—to announce his ways to the

¹ William J. Larkin, Jr., “Mission,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 534.

² Craig Ott, Steven J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 105.

nations. So Moreau, Corwin, and McGee are correct in asserting that “God is the one who initiates and sustains mission.”³

One fascinating element of early Christian mission was that there were very few full-time, vocational missionaries; rather, most of those involved in outreach witnessed unto Christ while occupied with other work. For instance, philosophers and teachers such as Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165) and Origen (185-254) taught philosophy and directed schools while also engaging in cross-cultural witness. Beginning in the fourth century, an increasing number of monks pursued cross-cultural missionary work in addition to their ascetic callings. Finally, a number of bishops—those set apart to lead established congregations—engaged in missionary work. In addition to his responsibilities as bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus (ca. 115-200) engaged in evangelistic preaching among Gaelic speakers in the rural areas around Lyons. In Asia Minor, Gregory Thaumaturgus (ca. 213-270) was set apart as bishop of his native Pontus and spent many days caring for the poor and oppressed while also evangelizing intellectuals.⁴

Examples of church focused mission

In order to make the case that the church was the locus of mission, let us examine the intercultural ministry of a sample group of four church leaders who served in diverse contexts over the first five centuries. In each case, we will establish that they were involved in intercultural mission, consider how they approached mission, and show how the church was central to their missionary thought and practice.

Martin of Tours (316-397), Gaul

According to Sulpicius Severus, following his conversion and release from the Roman army, Martin became a semi-hermitic monk and went on to establish monastic communities at Milan, Poitiers, and Tours. Martin’s early career was shaped by his mentor Bishop Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 300-ca. 368) who was the strongest voice against Arianism in fourth-century Gaul. Initially resistant to the idea of ordination, Martin became an exorcist under Hilary in Poitiers (360-372) and eventually bishop of Tours (372-397) making him the first known monk-bishop in the western church.⁵

How was Martin engaged in cross-cultural ministry? First, we should remember that Martin, a native of Pannonia (modern Hungary), was a foreigner to Gaul. These cultural differences were probably most apparent in his relationship to the clergy in the Gallic church who seemed to look down on Martin for his lack of education and simple lifestyle as a monk.⁶ It was probably these differences that also gave Martin a burden for and affinity with the rural poor in Gaul.

Second, Gaul was a mission field because, religiously, it was dominated by Roman paganism. Though Constantine, following his early fourth-century

³ A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 17.

⁴ Edward L. Smither, *Mission in the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 32-39.

⁵ Sulpicius Severus, *Life of Martin*, 2-3, 5-6, 9.

⁶ Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 350, 352.

conversion, had given peace and favor to the church, Ramsey MacMullen argues that a pagan worldview and its associated practices remained vibrant through the empire until the eighth century.⁷ As Theodosius did not introduce anti-pagan legislation until the late fourth century, pagan temples and rituals continued to be tolerated during most of Martin's lifetime.⁸

Finally, Gaul was a multi-cultural and politically unstable context because of the presence of the Visigoths. Marilyn Dunn writes, "the frontiers of the Roman Empire began to give way under barbarian pressure and German incursions across the Touraine led to the slaughter of its inhabitants and the destruction or abandonment of many settlements."⁹ Clare Stancliffe adds that the city of Tours itself was probably besieged and by 406, Gaul had been completely overrun by the Germanic tribes.¹⁰ Though Gaul did not fall completely until after Martin's death, the political and social environment in which he served as a bishop and missionary was quite unstable.

In his *Life of Martin*, a colorful account that is actually rather reliable because of his firsthand reporting, Severus narrates some of Martin's approach to mission that included destroying pagan temples, preaching, casting out demons, and healing. Based in Tours, Martin's itinerant ministry extended to Chartres, Paris, Trier, Bordeaux, and Vienne. Though his ministry was itinerant and his methods diverse, Martin's missionary work was quite connected to the church. In one account, Martin cast a demon out of a Roman pagan official named Tetradius and Severus records: "On seeing this, Tetradius believed in the Lord Jesus, and immediately became a catechumen, while, not long after, he was baptized."¹¹ In another instance, recorded in Severus' *Dialogues*, Martin healed a child in a pagan village and many apparently believed the gospel and Martin "made them all catechumens."¹² By inviting these individuals and groups to become catechumens and be baptized, Martin was also functioning as a bishop. In sum, there seems to have been a seamless relationship between his work as a missionary and as a bishop.

Basil of Caesarea (329-379), Asia Minor¹³

Having grown up in an ascetic family, Basil was already pursuing a monastic calling when he was ordained to ministry in the church of Caesarea—initially as a reader (360), later a presbyter (364) and then finally a bishop (370). Through remaining in a coenobitic ascetic community in Caesarea and developing an influential monastic rule, Basil set a high standard in the eastern church for being a monk-bishop.

⁷ See Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity & Paganism from the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

⁸ Stancliffe, *St. Martin*, 330.

⁹ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism: From the Desert Fathers to the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 62.

¹⁰ Stancliffe, *St. Martin*, 2-3.

¹¹ Sulpicius Severus, *Life of Martin* 17.

¹² Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogues* 2.4.

¹³ Much of the discussion on Basil is based on my chapter, "Basil of Caesarea: An Early Christian Model of Urban Mission" in Gary Fujino, Timothy R. Sisk, and Tereso C. Casino, eds. *Reaching the City: Reflections on Urban Mission for the Twenty-first Century* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 59-75.

Let us first describe the context of Basil's cross-cultural mission. Located on a key Roman road, Caesarea was an intercultural crossroads and frequented by diverse peoples from Armenia, Syria, Persia, and the northern Gothic regions. The city was also a frequent stopping place for the Roman army who commandeered food and supplies and put stress on a local economy that was already rather weak. Another challenge that Caesarea faced was poverty, particularly in the wake of a crippling earthquake that took place in 368. In addition to the various religious ideas held by those who passed through Caesarea, there was also much conflict within the church over the Arian crisis and Basil had consistent conflict with other church leaders and political officials who had Arian leanings.

How did Basil approach mission? First, as a bishop, Basil preached in order to disciple the faithful in Caesarea but also for the purpose of evangelizing non-believers. His preaching also had a prophetic element as he condemned the rich who were exploiting the poor and others who were hoarding food during Caesarea's crisis following the earthquake. Second, Basil's most concrete expression of mission was establishing the *Basileas* ("new city") on the outskirts of Caesarea. There, in conjunction with the church and his community of monks, the *Basileas* included a hostel to offer hospitality to travelers, a hospital for the sick, a food distribution center for the poor and hungry, and possibly a training center where people could acquire job skills.

As Basil labored with his monks in the community, he, like many other fourth and fifth century bishops sought to evangelize those who frequented the church in through the context of the church year.¹⁴ Thus, as a monk-bishop, Basil's mission was necessarily integrated with his work in the church. Finally, as a metropolitan bishop, he expected other church leaders in Asia Minor to be engaged in mission, especially as it related to caring for the poor.

Ephrem of Syria (306-373), Edessa

Ephrem was the most famous theologian of the fourth-century Syriac church and is best remembered for articulating theology in the form of hymns and poetry. Born in Nisibis (modern Nusaybin, Turkey), Ephrem left his home city when it came under Persian control and immigrated to Edessa where he started a theological school. Though he apparently resisted ordination, he eventually became a deacon in the church at Edessa.

Living in this multi-cultural context on the eastern edge of the Roman Empire next to Persia, Ephrem's mission work included teaching Scripture in a context of heresy (Arianism, Gnosticism), rival religions (Zoroastrianism), and political tension. In addition, in the last decade of his life, he focused on ministering to the poor and sick in Edessa, especially those affected by famine and the plague. Ephrem's service included organizing a food drive for the hungry and founding a hospital in Edessa. Citing in part the church historian Sozomen, Holman describes Ephrem's ministry: "In the late 360s, Ephrem became the steward of funds to provide for victims of famine in Edessa. As soon as the rich gave him their supply, he 'had about three hundred beds fitted up in the public porches and here he tended

¹⁴ See Stephen M. Hildebrand, *Basil of Caesarea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 114-115.

those that were ill and suffering from the effects of the famine.”¹⁵ Sozomen’s observation that Ephrem’s ministry audience included “foreigners or natives of the surrounding country” certainly highlights the intercultural and non-discriminatory nature of his work. Finally, Ephrem apparently shared the gift of his theologically rich hymns with the afflicted as these songs proved to be a comfort to those who were sick and dying. In the midst of such courageous service, Ephrem died in 373.¹⁶ In short, Ephrem carried out his mission work not as an itinerant missionary but as a deacon of the church at Edessa.

Patrick of Ireland (ca. 387-461), Ireland

The famous patron saint of Ireland was probably British and his initial time in Ireland came against his will as he was captured and enslaved by the Irish. Though his father was a deacon and grandfather a priest in the British church, Patrick probably converted as a teenager in Ireland. According to his *Confessions*, he escaped to France and while there he had a vision to return to evangelize the people that had enslaved him. Already practicing some form of asceticism, he was ordained as a missionary-bishop to the Irish by Pope Celestine and he arrived there in 432.¹⁷

Patrick regarded Ireland as the ends of the earth and he longed to evangelize in this place where no one had been baptized or confirmed.¹⁸ Reflecting on his ministry, Patrick referred to the “many thousands . . . I have baptized in the Lord.”¹⁹ So in this sense, his mission work was framed in ecclesial and liturgical terms and catechesis and baptism—supported by a clear commitment to the Nicene Creed—were central in his approach.²⁰ Communicating the gospel in an animistic, Druid context, Patrick’s preferred method was approaching local tribal leaders first, gaining their favor, and then preaching. Discipleship, spiritual formation, and church planting were central to his ministry and by 447, it is believed that as many as 200 new churches had been started.

Patrick had the unique opportunity to be set apart as a monk-missionary-bishop in an age when bishops were consecrated after a community of believers had been established. His missionary calling was wedded with an ecclesiastical one from the beginning and his work only resulted in more churches being established. Perhaps his father and grandfather’s ordinations and commitment to the church helped to shape this also. It seems that Patrick’s church leadership model shaped the future of the Celtic church leadership structure. Blocher and Blandenier note, “The Irish church slowly developed its own structure that followed the monastic form. Parishes were directed by communities of monks, with the abbey’s authority

¹⁵ Sozomen, *History of the Church* 3.16 cited in Holman, *Hungry Are Dying*, 60.

¹⁶ Dale T. Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 198.

¹⁷ George C. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West . . . Again*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 15.

¹⁸ Cf. Patrick, *Coroticus* 6; also *Confessions* 58.

¹⁹ Patrick, *Confessions* 14.

²⁰ Ted Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2003), 74; also Patrick, *Confessions* 4; cf. Thomas O’Loughlin, *St. Patrick: The Man and His Works* (London: Triangle/SPCK, 1999), 54-55.

soon supplanting the bishop's."²¹ It seems that the same monastic structure that facilitated its missionary efforts was adopted to lead the established church—one that was a leader in missions-sending in Europe in the sixth and seventh centuries. Interestingly, the Celtic church later experienced conflict with the rest of the church in Britain, which had adopted a more Roman style of leadership.²²

Conclusion

Other ordained church leaders engaged in mission could be mentioned, including Gregory Thaumaturgus in Asia Minor, Irenaeus in Gaul, and arguably Ambrose in Milan and Augustine in North Africa. The four leaders highlighted in this study—Martin, Basil, Ephrem, and Patrick—were engaged in mission because they lived and served in multi-cultural settings and regularly crossed boundaries of worldview belief in proclaiming the gospel. Martin and Patrick were more itinerant in their approach, while Basil and Ephrem did not travel. Preaching the gospel, catechesis, baptism, caring for the poor and those in material need were observable aspects of each man's mission. In the example of Patrick, planting new churches was an outstanding value. Clearly seen in the example of Basil (although quite likely in the others note), preaching, catechizing, and baptizing in accordance with the church year were central to his mission strategy. In short, in an age where there were no dedicated mission sending structures (i.e., missionary monastic orders or missions societies) local church communities led by bishops, presbyters, and deacons, functioned as the means of mission.

²¹ Jacques A. Blocher and Jacques Blandenier, *The Evangelization of the World: A History of Christian Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 60.

²² *Ibid.* 61.