

Turning Points in the Expansion of Christianity: From Pentecost to the Present

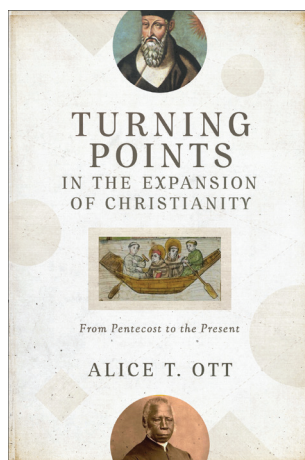
By Alice Ott

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Our task is complex. As workers, we are commissioned by Christ and his church to proclaim the good news and establish churches in cultural contexts often radically different from our own. Who among us has not struggled to clearly share the gospel, debated how to disciple new believers through situations we have never faced, or been perplexed about how to discern the true character of a potential leader?

Church history helps answer these questions and many others. By discovering how Christians applied the Scriptures to their situations in various cultural contexts throughout history, we are better equipped to carry out our own ministry. As one practitioner encourages us, “the Latin and Greek Fathers, the Medieval apologists, the Reformers, the Puritans,

the Particular Baptists, and the leaders of eighteenth-century evangelicalism is an exercise in cross-cultural hermeneutics” (Burns 2021, 144).

Hence, church-planting practitioners ought recognize the importance of books like Dr. Alice Ott’s *Turning Points in the Expansion of Christianity*. Dr. Ott tells the story of twelve key events, or eras, that evidence a shift in the way the gospel crossed cultures. While not a complete history of missions (many key individuals and eras are left untouched), this book focuses on the most significant paradigm shifts in missiological theology and practice.

Alice Ott is an affiliate professor of history of mission and world Christianity at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School with years of church planting experience in Germany. She writes in an accessible, narrative style, utilizing many primary historical sources as well as non-western and pre-Reformation examples of mission practice as her distinctive contribution to the literature (23). While the book is aimed at historically curious believers and not gospel workers specifically, workers are among those who would most benefit.

The book begins with a familiar story: the biblical narrative of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. Then after a chapter on Saint Patrick, Ott recounts a story less familiar to Protestants: the East Syrian mission to China in the seventh and eighth centuries. Known in the West as the Nestorian Church, this ancient East Syrian Church was a thriving center of missional monasticism and theology for centuries. East Syrian monks and merchants took the gospel across the Silk Road, reaching as far as China in 635 during the Tang dynasty (95). Regrettably, these missions’ cultural accommodation to Taoist and Buddhist beliefs expanded over time until the church grew weak and disappeared from the historical record until the thirteenth century (121).

The English and Irish work among Germanic tribes in the seventh and eight centuries is followed by a leap of nearly a millennium to Jesuit work among the Chinese, especially that of Matthew Ricci. Mission for the

Jesuits involved significant cultural accommodation to Confucian beliefs, which was in stark contrast to undertakings by Dominican and Franciscan monks (175). Ricci and his colleagues went so far as to downplay the cross in their evangelism, and their work lacked lasting fruit (190). However, the Jesuit mission did ensure “cultural accommodation” (or, we might say, “contextualization”) would remain a crucial question for future generations of cross-cultural workers (170).

Ott then moves on to Protestant history with the story of Count Zinzendorf and the Moravian workers, who were models of sacrifice, self-support, cultural adaptation, and wise evangelism (207). Chapter seven is about the father of modern missions, William Carey. Influenced by the Moravians, Carey’s example and writings were the primary catalyst for the rapid expansion of Protestant global mission in the nineteenth century. Carey’s work in adapting the voluntary society as a structure for missions, his Bible translation work, and his confronting of social injustices remains influential today (245).

After surveying the “Christianity, commerce and civilization” approach that corresponded with British abolitionism, the book moves to significant practical questions, which emerged among workers in global mission. As Protestant missions expanded, the question of the end goal became more pressing: how should local churches function? The most influential voice at this time was Henry Venn, the secretary of the Church Missionary Society. His conviction that local churches needed to be “self-supporting, self-governing and self-extending” continues to guide missiology today, even though application of these principles was inconsistent during his lifetime (321).

Chapter ten presents a more political story of the high imperialist period of the late nineteenth century and how cross-cultural workers, especially those in Africa, interacted with foreign government operations. Chapter eleven describes the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910. This conference is contrasted in the final chapter with the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization, which was less ecumenical, more

evangelistic, and more global in its delegation (424). Ott relates the stories of these twelve turning points with little commentary, leaving readers to draw conclusions in regards to the wisdom and ongoing significance of various ideas and practices. However, she does draw out some common themes in her conclusion, themes which I will build upon in sharing some takeaways from the book.

Foremost is a theme that theology matters: our practice is affected by our understanding of God and the gospel. I was surprised to read how often eschatology was a significant factor, such as the missionary motivation for Patrick who believed the world was soon to end. Similarly, generations of believers after the Reformation did not believe Gentiles would come to faith in large numbers until there was a turning among the Jews. Ecclesiology (including clericalism, the roles of lay believers, the ongoing function of apostleship), and soteriology (hyper-Calvinism) played major roles in determining (or preventing) mission practice.

Some key theological questions we are facing today include: what is the church? What elements are essential to its nature? What is biblical teaching (monologue, dialogue, etc.)? How do we teach in various church contexts? What is the role of gospel workers? Should they model their ministry after Paul's? The more we think biblically and theologically about these questions, and the more we learn from the experiences of those who have gone before us, the better we are prepared to serve faithfully.

Second, beliefs regarding the church-state relationship have seriously impacted missionary practice. Early Reformers assumed the initiative for missions was the responsibility of benevolent, Christian rulers, while many workers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were compelled to cooperate with colonial powers. Similarly, today's gospel workers must decide how they present their identity, interact with hostile host governments, and "honor the emperor" while obeying Jesus above all.

Third, the importance of a long-term perspective is evident throughout the book. Surveying nearly 2,000 years of church history gives practitioners a perspective of our humble roles in God's continuous,

grand mission. The fact that there have been ongoing campaigns for the “evangelization of the world in our generation” since at least the late nineteenth century should make us pause and consider whether such a goal should be the lodestar of mission. Those who served faithfully and bore long-term fruit focused less on immediate results and instead sought to foster growth that would last for eternity—fruit they could bring before God’s throne.

This was especially evident in the way story after story emphasized that training leaders was crucial to the overall stability of a fledgling church. Aidan, an Irish monk working among Germanic tribes, established a school for ministry. William Carey “continued and furthered the training and empowerment of indigenous church leaders begun by the Danish-Halle and Moravian missions” (245), and the “Nevius Plan” in Korea resulted in massive breakthroughs as believers and leaders were trained. Our task is to humbly and faithfully teach believers to obey everything that Jesus has commanded and to present them to him as a pure bride. We must be careful not to finish the task prematurely.

Fourth, I was encouraged by the fact that many effective gospel workers were business people or professionals who took their jobs to other parts of the world. Syriac businessmen, for whom “merchant” was a metaphor for “ministry,” took the gospel down the Silk Road, while the Moravians formed guilds of artisans who took their trades wherever they went. While I am regularly frustrated by the demands of business responsibilities, church history teaches that these very responsibilities can be a catalyst for fruitful gospel work, a comfort for our hearts! The “team” structure of the Moravians emphasized “intense fellowship” and communal living while being closely integrated into local society (231). William Carey was highly influenced by their approach and encouraged teams to operate from a common purse and include a number of professionals, whose main task was to provide funds and freedom for teammates to preach unencumbered (257).

A broad survey of Christian history can be overwhelming, but Ott's clear writing style and self-contained chapters (each can be read on its own) make the book accessible. And because *Turning Points* is a broad overview, the juxtaposition of these major events helped me understand the most significant lessons from the history of cross-cultural ministry. The stories were accompanied by a robust bibliography, which pointed me to additional resources for learning more about these relevant historical periods and figures. Ott does not tell you what specific implications practitioners should draw from these stories as there is little direct application to modern missions. However, she does give a great deal of material which you can apply to your context.

Practitioners could gain quite a bit from a quick skim of the book; the general concept of each turning point is clearly articulated at the beginning and end of each chapter. The entire book has value, but for the reader with limited time, I recommend chapters three (the East Syrian mission to Asia), five (the Jesuit work in China), six (the Moravians), seven (William Carey), and nine (Three-Self Movement). Reading *Turning Points* will not solve your thorny issue, but it may help shape your thinking and start you in the right direction for further insight.

We are responsible to bring the gospel to our own generation and host contexts, but we need not do it alone or reinvent the wheel. Church history is a helpful companion in ministry and *Turning Points* guides you exactly where to find that help.

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