

10-1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Thiessen, D. (2022). Book Review: Turning Points in the Expansion of Christianity: From Pentecost to the Present by Alice Ott. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 14(2), 171-175. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol14/iss2/17>

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Book Review

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

By Alice Ott

Baker Academic, 2021

298 pages

\$28.99.

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Inspired by historian Mark Noll's 1997 book, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, Alice Ott¹, a professor of history at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has written a history of the expansion of Christianity "across geographical, cultural, ethnic and religious boundaries" (xv). The author's intentional use of the term "expansion" rather than "mission" is intended to separate the book from being labeled as another history of Western missionary efforts. The book is, consequently, global in scope, in addition to being historically comprehensive. The author seeks to make some distinct contributions by devoting 100 pages to the expansion of Christianity prior to the rise of

¹ The author is spouse of author Craig Ott, a co-author, with Gene Wilson, of the important church planting textbook, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

Protestant mission and by considering two, often-overlooked turning points—the influence of British abolitionism on mission efforts in Africa and the role of imperialism in mission (xxi).

The author offers the following list of 12 key turning points:

- The Jerusalem Council (49)
- Patrick and the Conversion of Ireland (ca. 450)
- The East Syrian Mission to China (635)
- Boniface and the Oak of Thor (723)
- Jesuits and the Chinese Rites Controversy (1707)
- Zinzendorf and Moravian Missions (1732)
- William Carey and the Baptist Missionary Society (1792)
- British Abolitionism and Mission to Africa (1807)
- Henry Venn and Three-Self Theory (1841)
- The Scramble for Africa (1880)
- The Edinburgh World Missionary Conference (1910)
- The Lausanne Conference on World Evangelism and Majority World Missions (1974)

Each turning point is given a full chapter and each chapter begins with a focus on the specific turning point in view. This is followed by a broader, historical view of other developments related to the key turning point. Each chapter then returns to the specific turning point for a summary analysis. The book concludes with a brief but important chapter that highlights what the author identifies as important and recurring themes in the history of Christianity’s expansion: mission theology, mission agents and structures, mission and culture, mission and state, and mission motivation and lifestyle.

Turning Points is academic in style, chock full of names, places, and dates. Each chapter includes sidebars with extensive quotations from relevant, primary sources. The author demonstrates a command of an astonishingly wide range of historical detail and is able to connect related historical events extremely well. For example, in chapter two the author describes how seventh century monks from east Syria, led by a bishop named Alopen, traveled some 2500 miles to spread the gospel in China (42). They encountered a miraculously sympathetic emperor named Taizong, of the Tang dynasty, who granted them freedom to preach the gospel message (46). This became a turning point in the expansion of Christianity as it represented “the high point and culmination of the early and remarkable mission enterprise of the Church of the East” (63). The

details of this relatively obscure chapter in the history of Christian mission are further enhanced with sidebars featuring quotations from the Nestorian Stele, a portion of an Ascension Day sermon by the Persian poet Narsai, and an excerpt from a seventh century theological treatise addressing monotheism.

The book also sheds light on how the expansion of Christianity intersected with other global events — a perspective that other histories can overlook. For instance, the author identifies the abolition of slavery in Africa as being a turning point in mission. While describing the shift in missional focus among Christians towards the African continent that coalesced during the late 1700s, the author notes that it was unique in two ways:

First...the focus on Africa was intimately linked with a desire to make national reparation for the collective sin of complicity with slavery; and second, it was joined with a clear humanitarian agenda to root out all remaining vestiges of slavery in Africa. In these ways, British abolitionism and the resultant mission to Africa was a turning point in the expansion of Christianity. (163)

Over time, missionaries saw that replacing slavery with legitimate forms of commerce was the most effective means for its eradication and the three C's — Christianity, civilization, and commerce — became one of the earliest expressions of a more holistic approach to the expansion of Christianity (172, 175).

A third strength of the book is its important conclusions section where the author brings various mission-related themes together. Of particular importance is the theological foundation for mission. The author demonstrates again and again, that without adequate theological motivation, mission either does not get off the ground, or is quickly abandoned in the face of inevitable resistance and hardship. The author notes the importance of St. Patrick's recognition of Matthew 28 as a motivating call to disciple all the nations, even those beyond the Roman empire (20), the various doctrinal beliefs of the Reformation era that muted missional activity (114), the importance of the Moravians abandonment of 'first fruits' theology — expecting only a sprinkling of Gentile converts in favor of focusing on Jewish converts — for their continuing missional effectiveness (127), the refutation by William Carey and Andrew Fuller of the anti-missionary implications of hyper-Calvinism (139) and the drift of liberal, mainline churches away from the Gospel message in the 20th century (251).

To her five themes listed above, perhaps the author could have added a sixth theme of significance, namely, the miraculous timing orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. This timing is on display at various points in the history of the expansion of Christianity, including the remarkable openness of the Hawaiian people to the gospel message in 1820, owing to their very recent — just four months earlier! — repudiation of their centuries old traditional religion, known as the kapu (Hawaiian for “taboo”) system (153). Presumably the author would agree that the Holy Spirit’s remarkable work of creating open doors to further the spread of the good news is at the heart of every turning point in Christianity’s expansion.

Because of its academic style, sometimes obscure themes, and a somewhat complex chapter structure, *Turning Points* is no easy read. It occasionally gets bogged down in too much detail regarding names, places, and dates. A more generous use of footnotes might have improved the flow of the narrative. This is less of a weakness, given the academic goals of the book, and more of a warning for the casual reader.

A more significant critique is that at times it does not seem that the author is able to convincingly argue that the chosen turning point is indeed a decisive moment in the expansion of Christianity. For instance, in chapter ten the author asserts that “The Scramble for Africa”— a term used to describe “the rapid political partition, conquest, and colonialization of the African continent by European powers during the high imperialist era, circa 1880 to 1914”— was a turning point in the expansion of Christianity (208). But the chapter seems more of an exploration of the complex relationship between imperialism and missionaries on the field. The relationship was varied with some missionaries collaborating with imperialistic aims, and others resisting. So, while the expansion of Christianity certainly has had a complex relationship with colonialism, it is unclear how the historical events examined constitute an actual turning point.

Finally, any book of this type is inherently subjective and open to dispute regarding the choice of turning points. The list of possible turning points is endless, and the ranking of turning points in terms of importance is a hornet’s nest. For instance, one perspective could insist that the rise of Pentecostalism impacted mission like nothing else, and that it represents a vital turning point. Or another viewpoint might emphasize the role of revivals in mission as being fundamental. Nevertheless, the list chosen here is worthy of serious consideration and the focus on lesser-known turning points and non-Protestant turning points does make this book’s perspective unique. It remains an important historical contribution to the understanding of how Christianity has expanded and should be read widely.

Turning Points represents a remarkable combination of wide-ranging observations regarding mission coupled with an extraordinary grasp of primary resources. It makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the expansion of Christianity, highlighting many obscure events and saints whose contribution to Christian mission should not be forgotten. More importantly, it brings to life the truth that, “This same Good News that came to you is going out all over the world. It is bearing fruit everywhere by changed lives” (Colossians 1:6, NLT).