



**CHRISTIAN CHURCH HISTORY:  
A FOCUS ON HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MISSION IN EASTERN NIGERIA UNION  
CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY-ADVENTISTS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Christian Church was founded for mission—reaching out with the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world. The research espouses Christian Church historiography as the mission history—which is the event of salvation in a lost world. The study aims at encouraging the writing of Christian Church history with the eye of Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond, without neglecting the rich historical records of the beginning of Christianity and its vicissitudes over the ages. In addition it aims at encouraging every denomination to write their church history in line with the Model, the book of Acts of the Apostles. The study is a qualitative research and has adopted a historical-biblical survey with missiological and pedagogical objectives. The research found out that the book of Acts of the Apostles as a historical document, could be modelled in Christian historiography. The study recommends that in addition to other subjects included in Christian historiography, and in view of the essence of Christianity, Mission should be made the mainstay of Christian Church history.

**Key Words:** Church, Mission, Propagation, Gospel, Commission.

**1.0 INTRODUCTION:**

The Old and New Testaments contain historical records with wonderful themes on how the world began through God's creative power. It reveals how sin came into this world and the effects of sin on humanity in particular and creation in general. The Bible also presents God's intervention and the plan of salvation. It tells how sin will be eradicated and God's promise of restoration of His creation.

All these information have been written as past history and preview of history. The Bible in the real sense, is the most reliable record and source of history for the Church and Church historians. The goal of the Bible is the proclamation of the wonderful work of Redemption through Jesus

Christ to fallen humanity and the restoration of all creation lost in sin at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Church history among other things, helps to stabilize Christians in the authenticity of the Bible as they see prophecies unfold in the world. As they are inspired through the events of the past, they also learn to avoid repeating the errors of the past. Many Christian historiographies have been written with this objective.

Christian history informs the reader of the origin of the church, evolution of doctrines and missions, and how the Christian Church has come a long way through challenges wrought by various human powers. Both secular and

religious powers, affected the experiences of the church from its inception to the present day, and yet it still survives. Church history teaches that in spite of all that the church encounters, God is still in charge of his church.

These historical records are very important part of Church history; however, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the need for intensive missionary activity to keep the church focused constitutes a challenge and a task. A thoughtful reading of Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles give insight and inspiration to the duty and place of an individual Christian and the cooperate church. In addition to fulfilling the missionary mandate, the history of the church written with the eye of mission will encourage, challenge, and strengthen future generations of Christians to refocus on the same mission mandate, as does the book of Acts. As the records of the work of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts of the Apostles illumines the reader, so will the records of history of the church's mission to the world do.

Generally speaking, both the Old and New Testaments present the Mission of God to the world. This Mission awakens the essential role of God's people in all ages to tell all creation about God's amazing love. In a specific sense, the book of Acts of the Apostles, on one hand, as a historical book of the Bible with the Epistles, constitutes a model of Christian Church historiography, especially in view of its Mission perspectives. The book of Acts of the Apostles deals with the missionary activities of the Apostles, which also can be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit through the Church. A careful study of the book of Acts of the Apostle, done side-by-side with other Epistles, reveals that mission is what makes up a larger portion of its contents and context.

The book of Acts when studied alongside these epistles, is a pointer to the fact that mission is

the essence of Christianity and its history. The Epistles are inspired epistolary writings or letters from the Apostles to individuals and membership of the churches established as a result of missionary activities referred to in the Acts of the Apostles. These Epistles address issues affecting the churches or individuals that are connected with the church. They were intended to advise, rebuke, and encourage recipients of the Gospel in good living and works of the gospel. The Epistles explain the essence of salvation in Christ Jesus. They give guidelines on church organization, practices, doctrines, and spiritual gifts, in order to facilitate Christian unity and maturity in the grace of Christ.

This research emphasizes that, it is in the book of Acts of the Apostles, studied side-by-side the other Epistles that the essence of the Christian Church and its mission praxis is revealed. It is in the book of Acts of the Apostles, studied side-by-side the other Epistles that, the works of the Holy Spirit have been recorded as a model for the church of Christ in all ages to follow. Therefore, the mainstay of Christian Church history is the story about Mission, which expounds the plan of redemption. It narratives how the Gospel has encountered people and cultures through the power of the Holy Spirit in the revelation of Jesus Christ, in order to provide salvation to humanity.

Kane(1978) asserts that,

One thing is certain; the Acts of the Apostles does not tell the whole story. There are hints in Paul's epistles that the gospel had a much wider proclamation than that describe by Luke. He states that the gospel had been "preached to every creature which is under heaven" (Col. 1:23); that the faith of the Roman church was "spoken of throughout the whole world" (Rom 1:8); that the faith of the

Thessalonian believers "...has gone forth everywhere..." (1 Thess. 1:8). (p. 9.).

The book of Acts captures the activities of the New Testament church, and of certain individuals. They include Peter, James, John, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, James the brother of Jesus, Stephen, Philip, Cornelius, Lydia, Felix, Festus, Agrippa, Timothy, Titus, Ananias, Luke, and Apollos. These persons were apostles, deacons, converts, and rulers that tried Paul, and his co-workers. Acts of the Apostles on one hand, discusses the events around the apostles' mission and experiences as they evangelized with the gospel. The epistles on the other hand, highlight on the contacts of the apostles and their admonitions through letters to the churches they labored for.

For example, the mission of Paul in Asian territories are recorded in Acts chapters 13 and 14. They include experiences of Paul on his missionary journeys to establish churches in Galatia and Ephesus and other places. Paul's epistles are additional evidence of his contacts with the churches established in these territories as he encouraged them or solved some of their teething problems. As the book of Acts focuses on the history of the church's mission, the study opines that the history of the Christian church should be a continuum of the account of the Christian church's mission.

Therefore, the research appeals that a place of prominence be given to "Mission" in modern Christian Church historiography. And that such history of Christian mission should be written to mirror the book of Acts of the Apostles when studied in consonance with the other epistles of the New Testament.

The study evokes a concern and a call for a new approach to historiography of mission of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern

Nigeria Union Conference in 21<sup>st</sup> century, to be modeled on the Book of Acts of the Apostles. The Eastern Nigeria Union Conference is an administrative entity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in eastern Nigeria. It covers two geo-political zones in Nigeria; namely: all the five states in Southeast, to include: Abia, Anambra, Ebony, Enugu, and Imo. It also includes a part of Southsouth which hosts four other states, viz: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, and Rivers States, summing-up to nine states. The territory hosts various peoples and culture that are seemingly in dire need of the Gospel. The Seventh-day Adventist church is encountering the peoples and culture in this territory with the gospel, like the apostles in the first century, and is establishing churches in various places. These missionary activities and methods adopted by the church and its agencies in soul winning, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church, and how he encounters peoples and cultures should be part of the church's historiography.

### Statement of Problem

The research statement of problem avers that, apart from the early Apostolic Era whose bulk of missionary activities are expounded in the book of Acts of the Apostles and other epistles, other Christian epochs up till the 16<sup>th</sup> century rarely have indications of mission. The only exception to this allusion was of the Ante-Nicene era [the time of the early church fathers when Christians were severely persecuted]. There were also glimpses of mission at the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. The medieval church period seemed to have lost the spirit of mission.

[U]ntil the 16<sup>th</sup> century the word mission was used for describing the doctrine of the Trinity. The verb *mitto* (to send) referred only to the task of Jesus Christ who was sent to Earth by God the Father to fulfill the work of salvation. It was the true and real *Missio Dei* – God's mission in this world. (Cenry, 2007, p. 1).

Cenry's claims above seem to infer that after the Apostolic Era, and beginning with the Nicene Era—A.D. 325, through the period dominated by the old imperial Roman Catholic Church, mission was only understood to have been fulfilled by Christ [*Missio Dei*] in his first coming. And that, after that long gap, mission only reappeared in the 16th century. These gaps in mission praxis in those years of Christian Church history were caused by development of various theological views and controversies. However, these views are incongruent with the mission of the Church.

By application, this study addresses the fact that there is a dire need of mission historiography or the writing of mission history of Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Eastern Nigeria Union Conference territory. That is not to say the works already done by writers of history of the church in this territory are of no use or inadequate. Contrarily, the study simply stresses that in 21st century the writing of mission history of the church should be modelled on that of the Book of Acts of the Apostles in Eastern Nigeria Union Conference territory.

### **Objectives of the Research**

The general objective of this research is to investigate the extent to which emphasis has been made to Mission in the Christian Church historiography from the inception of Christianity, especially from A.D. 33 to the present day. Such investigation is meant to encourage writers of church history to consider the inclusion of Mission as the mainstay of Christian Church historiography.

The specific objective is to encourage the redefining and writing of Church history in order to model the book of Acts of the Apostles, so that the essence of the church could be achieved in presenting the work the Holy Spirit is doing

in and through His Church by its various agencies. It also will project varied ways and methods in different Christian denominations to encourage and train future generations of Christians.

For Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Nigeria Conference territory, the historiography of mission of the church in the 21st century and beyond will be an initiative of instructive and innovative pedagogical instrument. It is meant to encourage church membership to learn from these historical records, so as continue to depend on the Holy Spirit in daily living, while fervently doing and fulfilling the mission of the church.

### **Conceptual Themes**

#### **1. Church History: Highlights on Its Meaning and Branches**

Church history also referred to as ecclesiastical history, as an academic discipline has been defined in various ways. Gwatkin (1909) defined church history as "the spiritual side of the history of civilized people ever since our Master's coming" (p. 4). *Renwick & Harman* (1999), however, defines it as an account of the Church's success and failure in carrying out Christ's Great Commission found in Matthew 28:19-20. They suggest that Church history constitutes four divisions; namely, church missionary activity, church organization, doctrine, and "the effect" of these "on human life". *Renwick & Harman* elucidate further that,

Church history is often, but not always, studied from a Christian perspective. Writers from different Christian traditions will often highlight people and events particularly relevant to their own denominational history. Catholic and Orthodox writers often highlight the achievements of the ecumenical councils, while evangelical historians

may focus on the Protestant Reformation and the Great Awakening (p. 8).

There seems to be variations in Christian Church's historiography. This is apparent in the words of Renwick and Harman, especially with emphases on the Roman Catholic, and Orthodox writers, and evangelical historians. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox writers' emphases on feats of Ecumenical councils, while the evangelical historians stress on the Protestant Reformation and the Great Awakening. Meaning that there are different foci as well as lack of homogeneity in the Christian Church history. By implication, these various approaches for writing "Christian" Church history surreptitiously create a wall of divide, disagreement, and disruption in appreciating the focus of Christianity—Mission,—for something else. In the face of this confusion, some of the writings may jettison the perspectives and mandate of mission bequeathed to the church by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Focus on mission as the essence of the Church could have brought unity amongst Christian Churches, if there had been an objective unity in their historiography. The study also proposes that focus on Christian Mission should constitute the 21st Christian Churches' historiographies in order to promote Christian unity which hitherto is moribund. As mission is fully brought into the history of these churches, it will proffer a turning point in harmonizing the focus and essence of the Christian Church.

## 2. The Christian Church and Mission

The concept of church in the light of the Bible is significant. The meaning of the church in the Old Testament is the Assembly of God's people, that is, the Jews; and in the New Testament, it is the body of believers in Jesus Christ.

The Greek word *ekklēsia*, which came to mean church, was originally applied in the Classical period to an official assembly of citizens. In the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament (3rd–2nd century BCE), the term *ekklēsia* is used for the general assembly [Heb. qahal – “congregation” or “assembly” emphasis supplied] of the Jewish people, especially when gathered for a religious purpose such as hearing the Law (e.g., Deuteronomy 9:10, 18:16). In the New Testament it is used of the entire body of believing Christians throughout the world (e.g., Matthew 16:18), of the believers in a particular area (e.g., Acts 5:11), and also of the congregation meeting in a particular house—the “house-church” (e.g., Romans 16:5). (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2019, September 19).

The church in this context is not a building. It is the *ekklēsia*—the called out people of God in Christ from the world. These people have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour. They constitute the mystical or spiritual body of Christ—where Christ is the Head and they make up the body, as an organism. The church can also be an organization of believers in Christ in a location or a universal body of denomination made of believers in Jesus Christ. It is also a constitution of all those who believe in Jesus Christ all over the world.

White (1911) says, “The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world (p. 91). The emphasis on this definition of the church is on mission—being the function of the church; that is, to preach the gospel to the world. The church exists to lead people to Christ for salvation.

DeYoung (2022, p.1). Defined mission as “the task given by God for the people of God to accomplish in the world.” The church has not sent itself; the mandate of preaching the gospel is divine. Robinson (1995) indicates that there are various tasks of the Church which are summarized into four highest priorities, namely: “1. To proclaim the Gospel throughout the world and make disciples of all of people (Matt. 28:19-20). 2. To serve as a community of worship and fellowship people— to manifest the presence and love of Jesus. (Matt. 18:20). 3. To nurture believers and prepare them to perform works of ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). 4. To represent the interests of the Kingdom of God in the world, and to influence our society with the ideals of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:13-14)” (p.5). Before the other three last functions can be carried out, the foremost function in the list, which is the preaching of the gospel is what brings about discipling.

Faircloth (1991) averred that, “the fundamental mission of the church is to witness the saving grace of God to all men.” (p. 20). All the above definitions of the church stress on the focus and essence of the church—mission. This study stresses that these functions should constitute the aspirations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church and its historiography.

Whether the work of preaching the gospel is done at home or abroad, it is mission. There is a reason for mission, and that reason is salvific. The Christian faith is a living faith, and the church is the depository of God’s truth. The truth brings transformation to those it encounters. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation in Christ, as Paul puts it in Romans 1:16. When the gospel encounters an individual or a culture, it produces transformation and salvation in them, these should be the essence of church history. The researcher prefers the Bible (New International Version, 1973) to offer

information for the improvement of this religious ideal valuation.

### 3. Propagation of Faith

Church history can be studied through one of its divisions called propagation. According to Cairns (1996), propagation is “the study of world missions, home missions, city missions, and the story of any special techniques by which the gospel has been carried to others ... The essential person-to-person nature of the spread of Christianity.” (pp. 23, 24). Propagation of the faith is a branch of Church history. This study emphasizes mission as the major aspect of Christian historiography; therefore, it accentuates an aspect of church history.

Brunner (1931) asserts that, “The church exists for mission as a fire exists for burning. Where there is mission, there is the church.” (p. 108). Ferdinando (2008, pp. 46-59). Postulates four principal contemporary understandings of mission as follows

1. The *Missio Dei*. This is the broadest method to mission. It stresses that all Christian mission is God’s. In other words, God alone “initiates, empowers, directs, and blesses all true mission.” This approach suggests that whenever human beings engage in mission they are simply co-workers with God. For example, Paul’s approbation of Timothy as a “fellow-worker” with God (1 Thess. 3:2).

2. The Cultural Mandate. In this approach, mission is considered narrowly: “the church mission, then, encompasses everything that Jesus sends his people into the world to do.” In this case it is the church that is given the mandate to perform certain functions, and not solely God. Cultural mandate is entrenched in the word of God found in Genesis 1:26-28. Simply put, God assigned human beings with

responsibilities to fulfill in the world and to rule over the earth as God's image [*Imago Dei*]. There in turn, make use of their God-given power found in the created order to take care and nourish the created works of God.

3. Social Action. This missiological style looks at the application of "social action," along with "the proclamation and making of disciples." It focuses on "alleviation of human suffering and elimination of injustice, exploitation, and deprivation." In other words, it is "remedial and reformative" in its focus. Such text like Galatians 2:10, "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do," points the fact that it has its root from the apostolic practices.

4. Making Disciples of all Nations. This approach and its involvement is much more in scope than evangelism and making converts. While it goes with the great commission to make disciples. It brings into it also the perception of Paul's missionary praxis of moving from place to place to make converts in "evangelistic missions," and remaining in "places for extended periods wherever possible, establishing churches and discipling individuals." Central to Paul's aim for doing these things, was to pass on to his converts "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27). This was the secret behind Paul's establishment of churches, for examples, Corinth for two years, and Ephesus for over two years.

All these approaches can be used to win souls into the kingdom of God if conducted with the help of the Holy Spirit. Trying to understand what mission means sometimes can be more expansive than doing mission itself. Simply telling or showing someone that Jesus loves the person in deeds of love and living by the grace of God, is mission in itself. In short, Mission is an act.

#### 4. Gospel Commission

The Great commission is found in the words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19-20: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (NIV).

White (1911), in her *The Acts of the Apostles*, says, "The gospel commission is the great missionary charter of Christ kingdom. The disciples were to work earnestly for souls, giving to all the invitation of mercy. They were not to wait for people to come to them; they were to go to the people with their message." (p. 28). Ryken (2003) describes it as, "a clear, unambiguous statement of [the church's] mission to the world." (p. 129).

At the root of the great commission is the divine interest to save the world from sin and its consequential doom through the life and death of Jesus Christ. In His life on earth, Jesus had developed men and women to be His followers through training. He wishes His followers to do same to those who have not known Him. This work or commission is not limited to preaching and baptizing people who accept the gospel, it also requires nurturing the recipients of the gospel into committed followers of Christ as his disciples.

The Greek word for "disciple" is *matheteuo*, meaning a follower, a learner. The disciples were followers of Jesus and learners from Him. The great commission called them to do what He

had done. They were to make disciples. This is the primary emphasis of Matthew 28:19. Making disciples is the main verb of the verse. The other verbs – going, baptizing, teaching – are subordinate ... Not until the new believer is linked to the body of Christ, formed into fellowship with other believers, and responsibly ministering for others have we made a disciple (Cress, 2000, p. 13).

Discipleship, therefore, is the essence of the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20. It has a kingdom motif - that is, inviting all creatures to the kingdom of grace in Christ through the preaching of the Gospel. It includes nurturing and training in witnessing for Christ of new converts, so they could have fellowship with other believers and minister unto others who have not known Christ. This is intended so that all who believe in Christ will have the privilege of receiving salvation through Jesus Christ the Lord. The vehicle for this commission is the Church, the body of Christ. This is what is generally called evangelism or sometimes referred to as propagation.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **The Acts of the Apostles and History of**

#### **Mission**

In the Bible, the book of Acts of the Apostles is located between the Gospels and the Epistles, including the book of Revelation which writing style is epistolary. A careful indebt reading of the book shows that, the book of Acts is an important link between the Gospels and the epistles. Some of the stories in the epistles are highlighted in the book of Acts, and some of the activities mentioned in the Gospels have their complete records in the book of Acts of the

Apostles. For example, the story of the gift of the Holy Spirit at the Ascension of Jesus Christ and the preaching of the gospel as a result of the power of the Holy Spirit for the conversion of souls (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-20; Luke 24:46-49, and John 20:21,22 cf. Acts 1:4-8; see also Romans 1:1-9). Such a role seems like what a bridge does topieces of adjoining lands, bridging them together for easy passage. The book of Acts of the Apostles bridges the Gospels and the epistles. It connects the revelation of Jesus in the Gospel to the experience of Jesus through the Holy Spirit in the life and mission of men and women who constitute his church. Therefore, the book of Acts presents the Gospel and the records of how the early Church practiced the Gospel Commission.

Fairchild (2008) postulates that the themes in the book of Acts include the outpouring of God's promised Holy Spirit which enabled the preaching of the gospel. The primary theme which runs through the book is that believers on receiving the message of Jesus were empowered by the Holy Spirit to spread it. This divine act amounted to establishment and continuous growth of the church from its local beginning in Jerusalem "to the ends of the earth." Next, is that the believers did not grow the church by their power but were empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit as it is today.

It is signifies that, "Christ's work, both in the church and in the world, is supernatural, born of his Spirit."It should be known that believers in Christ are "Christ's vessels," yet" the expansion of Christianity is God's work. He provides the resources, enthusiasm, vision, motivation, courage and ability to accomplish the work, by the infilling of the Holy Spirit." Other themes include, opposition manifested in "imprisonments, beatings, stoning and plots to kill the apostles." The results of all these turned out into, "[r]ejection of the gospel



and persecution of its messengers,” which in turn, “worked to accelerate the church's growth” (pp. 46-49).

The main lesson from the experience of the early church is that, while the Christian Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century preaches the gospel, today, rejection of and resistance to the gospel should not be seen as strange happenings. Notwithstanding, Fairchild affirms that, Christians are to stand firm “knowing God will do the work, opening doors of opportunity even in the midst of severe opposition” (p. 47). The need of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is double outpouring of the Holy Spirit for mission more in magnitude than the early church needed. This endowment is essentially required, especially as the population of the world has moved to eight billion, according to United Nations (UN) broadcast. (Riddle & Treisman, 2022, p. 1).

There will be explosion in the growth of the church as there will also be resistance and persecution as the gospel moves into the hinterlands, cities of the world. The marked un-entered areas known as “10/40 windows” where most of the world religions other than Christianity exist will be evangelised. Three continents are featured in the book of Acts, namely, Europe, Africa and Asia.

According to Graig Keener (2013) in his study of Acts 16:9, “the first missionaries were not Europeans, but were from a part of Asia just a few days’ walk to north of Africa. Yet even at an early time, they brought their message to Europe” (p. 1). These postulates suggest that God can use those he wishes to propagate the gospel. Today, many Africans are also sent to America and other continents of the world. If the gospel was taken to three continents at the time of the Early Church, the Christian Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has more responsibility to take the gospel to more than six continents of the world,

in addition to those in the Arctic and Antarctic circles. Philip led the Ethiopian eunuch, from Nubia - that is Sudan [Ethiopia] in Africa, to receive the Gospel (Acts 8:26-40). He had also witnessed in Samaria (Acts 8:4-13). Such records of missionary activities present the global perspective of mission in Acts, as an example for the Christian Church to emulate.

Kane (1978) alludes that Paul’s three missionary journeys lasted less than fifteen years. These journeys took him into “four populous provinces of the Roman Empire: Galatia and Asia in Asia, and Macedonia and Achaia in Europe” (p. 9). The book of Acts discusses both home, city, and foreign missions at the time of the Early Church. For example, Peter and the rest of the apostles started preaching in Jerusalem. Paul preached in Tarsus in Asia, which also is his home/city. Peter went to Samaria, same did Philip, which is an extension to other cities. Paul and Silas went on overseas mission in Asia and Europe.

The fact of the far reaching influence of the Gospel was attested to by Paul the Apostle, when he wrote to the Colossians that the gospel “has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven” (Colossians 1:5-6). He referred to the impact of the gospel which the Colossians received, which also was being received by other people in the globe. These strides were achieved by the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of the words of Jesus Christ in Acts 1:8: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Such examples of mission should constitute the mission fervor of the 21<sup>st</sup> Christian Church.

Ludlow (2022), assesses the difficulties encountered by the apostles as the church expanded to include: “Long, dangerous travels, persecutions, issues of Church policy,

incorporation of foreigners”(p. 1). The issue of incorporation of foreigners concerns the inclusion of gentiles in the commonwealth of the Christian faith. The inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian faith was a cultural issue as seen in Cornelius’ and Peter’s encounter in Acts chapter 10. God used the vision he shewed to Peter and the experience of reception of the Holy Spirit by Cornelius, a gentile, with his household, to convince some Jewish members of the new church that, “God is no respecter of person: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.” (vs.34-35). It was evident that the Gentiles received the same unction of the Holy Spirit akin to the one the Jews had at the Pentecost.

However, the whole matter concerning the inclusion of the gentiles was finally voted as a policy at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. A letter was written and sent to Gentile churches that no one should lay much burden on the gentiles’ converts as regards the law of Moses. Instead they apostles enjoined them to keep or observe a few of the requirements which related to idolatrous food offering and partaking of such, chastity, and improper meat slaughtering and partaking of it. Ludlow avowed that these retraining policies were against those practices “which would have been common in gentile communities particularly as part of their pagan temple worship” (vs. 19-20).

It will be unfair to that decision made by the Apostles and the council at Jerusalem to limit Gentile believers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to only four items of faith on grounds of that letter. This will ignore the reference to the reading of the Torah every Sabbath: “Moses is being read in the synagogue every Sabbath”(Acts 10:21). The statement is an allusion which indicates that the council intended continuous teaching and discipling of the gentile believers through the Torah, as they grew in the faith and worship of

God. This fact is buttressed by the pedagogical significance of the Scripture and the epistles sent afterwards to some of the gentile churches by the Apostles with Paul as an example. In his epistles, such as the epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, to mention but a few, Paul stressed on several other conducts which were not expected from those that have become Christians. These epistles teach more than the four articles of faith. The principle adopted by the Jerusalem is that new converts are not supposed to be loaded with much of the doctrines at the beginning. They are to be led to Christ first; thereafter, are continually groomed with more doctrines. This pedagogical principle of teaching new converts into the Christian faith agrees with the Great Commission in Matthew 20:19, 20, already quoted in this study.

### **The Periods of Christian Historiography in Relation to Christian Mission**

The periods in Christian Church history is seamless, as encapsulated in the prophetic Book of Revelation Chapters 2 and 3 about the experiences of the Christian Church in seven epochs. These seven churches are characteristic of the Christian Church in seven prophetic periods. These churches depict the conditions of the Christian Church in seven epochal periods, beginning with the time of the first apostles unto the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. (White, 1911, p. 585). This record in the book of Revelation confirms a continuum in the Christian Church historiography.

The Church has continued to exist irrespective of its varied experiences, from inception. The Christian Church which the Lord Jesus Christ started has undergone several testing experiences and changes over the years to include killing and incarceration of thousands of its members, doctrinal debates and invention of

non-biblical practices, and adulteration of Christian beliefs and practices. However, it has survived all of these, and soon will become the church triumphant.

Fanning (2009) reckons the period from c. A.D. 33-100 as the era of the Apostles, or the Apostolic Age, when the first apostles were still alive, though other writers reckoned this period differently (p. 2). For example, the Seventh-day Adventist interpreters reckon this period to have covered c. A.D. 31-100; these different dating can hardly be exact, but simply “are at best convenient landmarks” (Nichol, 1978, pp. 753-754).

Borrowing from the Christian tradition, Fanning asserts that John, was the last of the apostles to die and the only one among them who died a natural death. Other apostles died by martyrdom for the sake of preaching the Gospel. Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome by Nero along with thousands of other Christians who were burnt, impaled, crucified or fed to lions in Colosseums or Flavian Amphitheatres. Nero burnt the city of Rome and blamed it on the Christians as a cover to justify the mass slaughter of Christians in Rome. As persecution continued in an attempt to stop the gospel from spreading, other apostles were continually martyred; Judas Thaddaeus was killed by mob in Ardaze, Armenia, and Bartholomew (Nathanael) was flayed and crucified in Albana with thousands of believers.

In addition to the list of martyrs, John Mark was martyred in Baucalis, near Alexandria, Egypt, and Andrew was crucified in Patras, Achaia. Irrespective of the threats from persecution, “it appears that the mission of evangelizing all four million Jews throughout the diaspora was accomplished before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70” (Fanning, 2009, p. 10). The first century was very bloody for the apostles and adherents of Christianity. However, the

evangelistic spirit of the apostles in the face of persecution became an irresistible testimony to future Christians, as the price to be paid for mission. For example, Paul wrote in his epistle to the Philippians, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Phil 1:21).

The effect of persecution on the Early Church could be seen as Satan’s machination to frustrate the spread of Christianity and its mission. The years following the first and second century brought retardation on mission. Pavao (2014) narrates that the Apostolic Age which ended in c. A.D. 100, was also the period which marked the time of the death of Apostle John. The first century was a time of doctrinal purity and zest for mission among the believers in Jesus Christ. This period was followed by “Pre-Nicene” or “Anti-Nicene” Era; the p

eriod from c. A.D. 100-325. The Christianity of the Ante-Nicene Era experienced bequeathed unity, the apostolic truth and holiness, and it possessed the missionary spirit of the Early Church. Christians were free, simple, and had love for one another; their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, and “their endurance during persecution were powerful testimonies to the Romans around them.” (Paul Pavao, 2014, para 3) The era featured such dedicated men like Irenaeus (c. A.D. 185) and Tertullian (c. A.D. 200) who love the Lord Jesus Christ.

This era stretched into the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, when Christianity was becoming popular. Many who were not so separated from the world joined the church, including those who left the church during the time of persecution and returned for re-admittance. The presence of these unstable Christians in the church opened up debates and many other problems. The Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 is said to be a natural time to end “early Christianity” and the post-apostolic period. It marked the interface of the history of

the church with Emperor Constantine. The impact of missionary life of the Apostles was still on this era, though threatened by severe persecutions. The boldness to die for the “word and the testimonies” of the Lord Jesus was dominant (A Brief Overview of the Ante-Nicene Era, para. 1-4). It is reported of Tertullian, one of the early church fathers of the second century, who in the face of these severe persecutions, wrote in his *Apology* that, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of Church” (Tertullian, 2022, para. 25). This record simply showcases the faithfulness which the Christians of the Nicene Era possessed as they endured persecutions even in the face of death for the cause they had espoused.

Shelley (2022) considered seven periods of Christianity beginning from A.D 70-1990. Taking A.D. 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, as his starting point, he posits that Christianity was under the auspices of the early disciples and apostles of Christ, who were fishermen, tax collectors, and youth from the solitary territory of Judea. These men and women spread the gospel throughout the globe and about two billion estimated number of people embraced it. Christianity at the time encountered Gnosticism, Marcionism, Montanism and martyrdom with success, in spite of their threats.

Though opposition and martyrdom continued after the time of the apostles, other forms of oppositions to the gospel and Christianity had continued in the period under review. They included union of church and state, religious pluralism, humanism and secularism, Nazism, American democracy, and wars. Today, there are different shades of Christianity. Unequivocally,

Christians have always considered the ages of Jesus and his apostles a kind of model for all other ages. It gave the

church its faith in Jesus through the resurrected Messiah, and the hope of forgiveness of sins. And the ages demonstrated in the life of Paul that the gospel of grace recognizes no boundaries of nation, race, sex, or culture” (Shelley, 2022, para. 1).

Modelling the 21<sup>st</sup> century historiography after the Early Church is major emphasis on Christian historiography in this study. The Christian Church has no other story to tell other than the story of mission—how the Holy Spirit has, in the face of many encountering forces, conquered the hearts of people, and saved them for the Kingdom of God.

### Methodology

The study will be inconclusive if there is no methodology on how Christian historiography should embrace mission and patterned after the Book of Acts. Cairns (1996) posits that Christian Church historiography of a necessity requires the scientific elements in it. He avers that the historian should get “close” to the event as possible. Other option to consider in writing history of the church in the light of Acts will include “pessimistic optimists” approach.

The historians in this group “agree with pessimists in emphasizing the failure of unregenerate man; but in the light of divine revelation and grace, they are optimistic concerning man’s future.” The pessimistic optimists approach, “history as a biblical atheists and seek to find the glory of God in the history process” (p. 20).

Padilla (2016) presents an insightful study on the historiography of Acts. He averred that, “in view of external and internal features, Acts is best understood as an example of the ancient historical monograph,” which belongs to the

genre of history with a “category of ancient perception,” and of Greek origin. This genre had also been recognized by the Jewish writer in the second Temple period; for example as seen in 2 Maccabees, giving credence to Luke as the composer of the book of Acts. By this recognition Luke is accepted as a historian of his time and as “narrating what was no less a movement of God in his age.”

He is regarded as such because, a historian “affirms that the way he or she is describing events is as they actually happened.” Therefore, Acts’ history means that “Luke is claiming correspondence between the events he describes in the book and as they truly happened in the world outside the book.”(p. 19)

History as we understand it today is quite different from the way it was understood in Luke’s day. To differentiate Luke’s approach from those of modern history writing, the following questions were asked and their answers provided. What kind of history is Acts? To answer his question, Padilla(2016) asserts that, “exegesis of Luke’s preface and other sections of Acts were brought into conversation with Greco-Roman and contemporary historiography,” and the following ensued.

First, Acts, even by ancient standards, is an extraordinary fusion of the historical with theological. Luke especially in his preface, uses “scientific” language that would communicate to the ancient reader that what he was about to write was a careful, objective account based on him being an eye witness as well as interviewing eyewitness. The ancient term for this venerable approach was *autopsia*. And yet, in the same preface, Luke uses theological loaded words and phrase such as “fulfilled”

and “servants of the word.” Such a fusion of the historical and theological would have been strange to a Greek audience, but not to one with Jewish understanding. Second, Luke employs numerous narrative procedures in his unfolding of the history of the early church. These include compressing, epitomizing, telescoping, irony and so on. In fact, there is so much artistic shaping and stylization that—form a modern perspective (pp. 13, 107).

The Church historian who writes church history with the eye of mission modelled after the book of Acts of Apostles should adopt both historical, theological, and missiological approaches in his historiography. He makes use of what he sees as an eye witness, through interviews, and other authentic writings and reports from history. He should be thorough in his reporting and avoid the use of fiction. He should be scientific as a researcher in order to communicate to his reader in modern ways and terms that are easily understood by his readers. His historiography should include “compressing, epitomizing, telescoping, irony and so on,” (Padilla, 2016, p.107), and all the artistic shaping and stylization required in modern historiography.

The writer should remove the bias of denominationalism by creating the atmosphere and desire for mission on the minds of younger generations of Christians. They should be able to read any denominational history not only for knowledge and information about the vicissitudes of doing mission, but also how the Gospel encounters cultures, transforms them from idolatry to Christianity. They should be informed about the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit in miracles which changed lives and offered deliverance. It should include clear biblical teachings, establishment of entry

wedges such as schools, hospitals, and community services. This approach will revive and promote the mandate of the Early Church bequeathed by Jesus Christ on his church to finish the work by the continuous unction of the Holy Spirit in Christian mission and missions.

### Conclusion

The Christian church history in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—written in the eye of mission—encourages a novel and deliberate dimension in the writing of Church history with a mission focus. Church history of this sort should include, among other subjects, a methodology modelled after the Book of Acts as shown in this study. The literary style of the book of Acts of the Apostles was congruent with the standards of writing history in Luke's days, making it a model for Christian historiography in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in this research. The reason is that the Book of Acts was inspired, and writers of Christian historiography should be inspired as well to understand the essence of the Christian Church as Luke was, avoiding fiction, and present the record of event scientifically as they are.

The study neither rejects existing records of the experiences of the Christian Church through the ages nor the extant works of eminent scholars of Christian historiography, especially as the history of the Christian Church is a continuum and seamless. The church will continue to pass through so many vagaries of crises as the day of Christ's second coming approaches. However, the focus of the church should at this time of the end be directed to mission. The mission of the church is evangelism—mission to usher in the *Parousia*. This should form the basis of Christian historiography.

### Recommendations

Though different Christian affiliations will often highlight people and events in their historiography, particularly those making references to relevant aspects of their own denominational history. The objective of all Church history writing should be Mission, in order to get people prepared for the soon return of Jesus Christ. The study is aimed at encouraging and leaving every denomination with the option to write their church history in line with the Model, the Book of Acts of the Apostles.

For example, how the Holy Spirit led out in taking the Gospel into the world's un-entered areas, such as the 10/40 window and people groups, where some Christian workers and evangelists have rarely reached with the gospel. Christian Church history should address successes and challenges of Christian mission in such places and terrain, and other missionary activities. Writers of mission history of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Eastern Nigeria Union Conference territory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should present their works modelled on the Book of Acts of the Apostles..

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