


The missiological implications of Jesus's final departure from the Temple for Western Christendom



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Dates:
Received: 05 Apr. 2024
Accepted: 20 May 2024
Published: 28 June 2024

How to cite this article:
Ferreira, I.W., 2024, 'The missiological implications of Jesus's final departure from the Temple for Western Christendom', *In die Skriflig* 58(1), a3084. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3084>

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This article analyses the final departure of Jesus Christ from the Temple in Jerusalem during his last days on earth, signifying a critical juncture in God's interaction and engagement with his chosen people and consequently establishing the foundation for the spread of Christianity. By examining this event and contextualising it within the framework of God's prior actions concerning the Temple, this article aims to clarify the underlying rationale for this transformation in his relationship with his chosen people. Using a missiological perspective, the study extracts fundamental biblical principles that may serve as criteria for evaluating modern Christendom and the Western Church's current existential crisis, which urgently highlights its failure to fulfil God's mission in today's dynamic world. Through understanding the factors that contributed to this historical shift in God's engagement, valuable insights can be gained to urge the Western Church to promptly reassess its contemporary missiological disposition.

Contribution: The article contributes significantly to the journal's mission of advancing Reformed Theology by examining Jesus Christ's final departure from the Temple, identifying it as a pivotal event in God's interaction with his people and the foundation for Christianity's dissemination. Additionally, it offers a missiological viewpoint to assess present challenges confronting the Western Church, prompting a re-evaluation of its mission strategy within contemporary contexts, thereby enriching the discourse on Reformed Theology and its relevance in today's world.

Keywords: Western Christianity; Christendom; Death of Christendom; religious delusion; missional ecclesiology.

Introduction

For approximately a millennium, during the era of the Old Testament, a physical sanctuary existed wherein God engaged with his chosen people, Israel. The arrival of Jesus Christ on earth, in accordance with God's providential timing (Eph 1:10), signified a paradigmatic shift in his relationship with his people. In the closing days of Jesus's earthly ministry, He deliberately entered and subsequently departed for the very last time from the Temple in Jerusalem. This act foreshadowed the Temple's complete destruction approximately 30 years later, an event He predicted to his disciples shortly after leaving the Temple (Mt 24:1–2). Although the Bible indicates that this was not the first instance in redemption history where God chose to disengage from his chosen people, it was a definitive moment within salvation history that catalysed a total transformation in God's divine relationship with his chosen people.

Fast forward, nearly two millennia to discover Western Christianity experiencing an existential crisis increasingly referred to as the 'death' or end of Christendom (Guder n.d.:1). The Christian Church, rooted in the New Testament, faces a desperate struggle for survival within Western culture. Western theology remains stagnant, maintaining a paralysing status quo mentality (Sanneh 2003:3). A startling wake-up call arises from the depths of missiological isolation, demanding an urgent inquiry beyond the visible and perplexing geo-political global events of our time (Ott & Netland 2006:15). This call seeks to comprehend the causes behind these transformative developments, affecting both the world and the Christian Church. It is a call for a return to the Bible. The question arises: What is prompting the providential God to permit this transformative period in human history? This article aims to provide a biblical answer, clarifying the reasons and purpose for the current paradigmatic shift in God's engagement with Western Christianity.

Note: Special Collection: Theological perspectives on the Presbyterian church governance system.

God's engagement with his chosen people from Old Testament perspective

A universal perspective on redemption

From the very beginning of time, the Creator God established a profound and enduring relationship with the first humans, whom He created in his image (Gn 1:26). This relationship was intended to continue eternally. The unfortunate fall of the first humans in the Garden of Eden permanently disrupted this intimate connection between God and humanity. The Bible, however, reveals that the fall did not extinguish God's relationship with humanity; rather, it prompted another redemptive response from Him. As early as Genesis 3:9, God interacted with Adam and Eve as they attempted to conceal themselves from Him. This redemptive re-engagement by God to restore their relationship signified the initial disclosure of the *missio Dei* (the mission of God), as explained by Flett (2010), a plan preordained by God before creation (Eph 1:10).

Despite the fall and its grave repercussions, the Bible explicitly reveals that God wants to reconcile with all of humanity. Acknowledging human sin in the book of Genesis and its intensification leading up to the flood narrative (Gn 3–9), God recommences his redemptive journey with Noah and his descendants (Gn 9–10). The account of the Tower of Babel underscores humanity's inherent sinful nature in their collective enmity, but also unveils God's gracious perseverance in continuing his outreach. By dispersing individuals across the globe into diverse nations and languages (Gn 11), God enables humanity's proliferation throughout the earth. Genesis 12 subsequently discloses the intricate particulars of God's redemptive re-engagement with fallen humanity when He enlisted Abram and his descendants as a chosen people for his global mission (Gn 12:1–3). God aimed to extend his reach and bless all of humanity through Abram and his descendants.

It is crucial to acknowledge that God's redemptive re-engagement with fallen humanity would transpire within the context and over the unfolding millennia of fallen human history. With Abram's calling, the stage was set for the Old Testament phase of the *missio Dei*. The biblical revelation of Israel's history in the Old Testament unveils God's sustained redemptive concern for all of humanity. As the Creator and Lord of the entire world, the God of Israel must consistently be recognised in relation to the histories of all nations. God's involvement with Israel's history can only be understood in conjunction with his connection to other nations (Bosch 1991:18). The divine election of Israel should not be misinterpreted as a rejection of other nations (Wright 2006:263).

A particularistic perspective on redemption

God's universalistic redemptive involvement with all of humanity simultaneously demonstrates a highly particularistic emphasis (Wright 2006:252). A covenantal framework, which

is established, disclosed, and fully actualised within Old Testament history, serves as the basis for the initial development of the *missio Dei*. This engagement with Israel as God's chosen people manifests in his redemptive presence among them, consequently facilitating their redemptive presence and mission within the broader human community.

The presence of God among his chosen people

Initially, the focus of God's presence amid his chosen people revolved around an altar. Introduced in Genesis 4, the altar symbolises the transformative re-engagement that God initiates and establishes with sinners following the fall. The required sacrifice on the altar unveils the specific new *rules of engagement* with the holy God. The renewed relationship between God and his people must facilitate reconciliation through atonement and reestablish devotion through sacrifice (Leder 2019:60–61). The Old Testament altar serves this purpose within the religion of God's people, facilitating complete atonement for human sin while simultaneously requesting and initiating total dedication to his service. The altar of atonement, as a focal point for interaction between a merciful God and the fallen humanity, represents both the complete renunciation of sin and the unconditional, self-sacrificial commitment to follow God's will. God's chosen people are saved to serve.

The progression from simple altars constructed by early biblical figures such as Cain, Abel, Noah, and Abram foreshadowed the eventual emergence of a more significant sanctuary within Israel's history (Leder 2019:58). This physical sanctuary became integral to the lives of God's people, as numerous pivotal events in biblical and historical records transpired within and around Israel's sacred spaces, underscoring their utmost importance in ancient Israel. A very brief historical overview spanning around one thousand years of God's sanctuary among the people of Israel underscores its significance in God's interaction with his people for the sake of his mission.

The Tabernacle

After Israel's exodus from Egypt, God ordered the creation of the Tabernacle, a portable sanctuary for the nomadic nation journeying to the promised land of Canaan. As God's 'earthly dwelling place', the Tabernacle symbolised his presence during their journey through the desert. Meticulously crafted under Moses' guidance at Mount Sinai, it remained the central religious focus for the people of Israel. Nine months after their departure from Egypt, God's glory, manifested as a cloud, descended from Mount Sinai to inhabit the Holy of Holies within the Tabernacle (Ex 26).

It is vital to recognise that shortly after embarking on their desert journey, the people of Israel transgressed against God (Ex 33). God promptly commanded that the Tabernacle be erected outside the Jewish camp and threatened to withdraw his presence from their midst and journey, due to their transgressions. The Bible is truly clear, even at the very start of their journey with God, that He would disengage from his

people when they waver in their devotion and religious commitment. They are different from other nations because of God's presence in their midst (Ex 33:16). If they sin against God, they will become just like all the other nations because God will no longer be in their midst.

The town of Shiloh

The town of Shiloh played a central role in Israel's cultural and spiritual life upon entering Canaan, serving as the hub for worship with the Tabernacle (Jos 18:1). The Tabernacle was erected in this town (Homan 2007) following their entrance into Canaan. Its significance spanned approximately 369 years, marked by difficult periods during the era of judges and the early monarchy. Shiloh's history can be divided into pre-monarchy, monarchy, and decline phases. During the pre-monarchy era, it unified the 12 tribes, fostering a shared national identity. In the monarchy period, it remained a religious nucleus, particularly for the northern tribes. However, Shiloh suffered a setback when besieged by the Philistines, leading to the loss of the Ark that was symbolising Israel's spiritual decline. This decline accelerated with the exile of the northern tribes, reflecting divine retribution for faithlessness. God's withdrawal mirrored Israel's disobedience, marking a pivotal moment in their history.

The First Temple in Jerusalem

The First Temple, also known as the Temple of Solomon, held profound significance as Israel's sanctuary and symbolised their religious and national identity. It was the central religious, political, social, cultural, and economic institution in ancient Israel (Seely 2019:53). Constructed on Mount Moriah, where Abraham faced the trial of sacrificing Isaac, it represented Israel's faith and unity, particularly during the eras of prophets like Jeremiah and Isaiah. However, as Israel drifted from devotion to God, as warned by their spiritual leaders, the Temple met its demise. The Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE and the Babylonian exile of Judah in 586 BCE led to the destruction of Solomon's Temple after 360 years. This destruction, within the geo-political context of the ancient world, served as a divine retribution for Israel's failure to repent and align with God's purpose.

The Second Temple (Temple of Zerubbabel¹)

Following Cyrus of Persia's conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE, the Jews were allowed to return from exile, and they began rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. The Second Temple, also known as the Temple of Zerubbabel, became the new centre of Jewish worship and religious life. Its completion in 515 BCE ushered in a period of relative tranquillity. Regrettably, this respite was short-lived as power shifts within the dominant Empire led to Jewish subjugation under Antiochus Epiphanes from 175 to 164 BCE. The courageous Maccabean revolt culminated in the Temple's rededication in 165 BCE during a challenging time for the Jewish people. Israel never

really recovered their independence. Within the exceedingly difficult and challenging geo-political realities of that time, the Temple in Jerusalem remained the centre of their religious engagement with God.

The Temple of Herod

The Temple during Jesus's time was constructed by Herod the Great, who was appointed by the Romans to serve as king of Judea from 37 to 4 BCE. Despite the grief and fear he instilled in the Jewish people, Herod was a master builder, and the Temple was the crowning achievement of his accomplishments. It was to this magnificent structure that Jewish pilgrims from across the Mediterranean world came to worship. It is this 'Second Temple Judaism' (Salo 2011:3) that Jesus Christ encountered when his earthly ministry commenced. Nearly 1000 years of God's redemptive engagement with his chosen people at a physical sanctuary was coming to a climactic end.

Second Temple Judaism² and the Temple in Jerusalem

Onset

The Jerusalem Temple stood as a multifaceted institution, serving not only as a spiritual Centre for the Jewish people, but also as an economic powerhouse deeply connected with the sociopolitical context of Judea within the Roman Empire. Its significance transcended mere religious worship, embracing intricate economic and political dynamics that shaped the landscape of the Second Temple Judaism (Casey 1997:320). It is very important to understand this context as a background to Jesus Christ's last visit to the Temple.

Ethical and religious implications of Temple economics

Economically, the Temple functioned as a bustling commercial hub, often likened to the 'Royal Bank of Judea' (Hamilton 1964:370). Within its precincts, a multitude of transactions occurred, especially in the Court of the Gentiles. The influx of money during major festivals, notably Passover, was considerable, with the historian Josephus recording the sale of hundreds of thousands of sacrificial animals (Evans 1993:93) during such an event. The financial activity of the Temple extended beyond local boundaries, with substantial contributions flowing into the Temple from both Palestine and the Diaspora. These funds not only supported ongoing construction projects within the Temple, but also financed various initiatives benefiting Jerusalem as a whole. The Temple Bank, managed by the High Priestly Aristocracy, served as a pivotal link between the religious and the economic spheres (Hamilton 1964:367). The involvement of merchants and money changers, while essential for sacrificial worship, also highlighted the complex economic relationships between the Jewish elite and Roman authorities (Casey 1997:315).

1.The phrase 'Second Temple' is a designation used for both Zerubbabel's and Herod's Temples (Seely 2019:54).

2.The pre-70 period of Judaism is described as 'Second Temple Judaism' because the Temple stood at the very centre of Israel's national, economic, and religious identity at that time (Salo 2011:3).

This convergence of religious and economic interests raised ethical concerns regarding the sanctity of the Temple as the dwelling place of God.

Political landscape of Judea during Second Temple period

Politically, Judea simmered with tension as diverse religious and cultural factions competed for influence. The presence of zealots and brigands underscored the volatile atmosphere characterised by resistance to Roman rule (Casey 1997:313). Crucifixions, indicative of Roman repression, often followed outbreaks of nationalist zeal, reflecting the difficult balance of power at times when violent nationalistic resistance against Rome was prevalent among the Jewish people (Wedderburn 2006:4). These were specifically turbulent years in the history of the Jewish people. The Jewish-Roman war would commence within just a few years after Jesus's earthly ministry (AD 66–70).

Closure

The Temple in Jerusalem's centrality in the Second Temple Judaism period cannot be overstated, as it served as the epicentre of Israel's national, political, economic, and religious identity. Any crisis within the Temple naturally reverberated throughout the Jewish community and economy, highlighting its pivotal role in the socio-economic landscape of Judea. Understanding the Temple's economic cultural and political significance is therefore paramount in comprehending the events surrounding Jesus Christ's final visit to the Temple (Salo 2011:15).

God's transformative engagement with his chosen people in New Testament perspective

Onset

It was prophesied throughout Old Testament times, and therefore expected, that the Messiah would visit God's chosen people (Is 7:14). His coming to this world at God's appointed time is therefore the ultimate apex in God's redemptive engagement with his chosen people and all of humanity.

In the final days of his earthly ministry, Jesus visited the Temple in Jerusalem for the very last time. This event is consistently documented across all four Gospels, with each providing a unique perspective. Scholars have underscored the significance of this Temple incident in comprehending the events leading to Jesus's arrest and crucifixion, as well as illuminating the purpose of his mission in the world (Evans 1989:237). This article aims to present a comprehensive account of Jesus's final Temple visit, specifically focusing on its portrayal in the Gospel of Mark. Mark's Gospel is selected due to its distinct narrative structure and extensive use of Old Testament references, which contextualises the Temple cleansing within a broader biblical framework and connects it with comparable Old Testament events (Casey 1997:307).

Contextual setting of Jesus's last visit to the Temple

Upon Jesus Christ's entry into Jerusalem, He was greeted as a king by an enthusiastic crowd (Mk 11:1–11). However, Jesus knew that the people's expectations were misplaced and that they did not really understand what was happening, and Luke explicitly states that Jesus wept upon entering Jerusalem (Lk 19:41–42). Mark's narrative subsequently describes Jesus's encounter with a barren fig tree that was subsequently cursed by him (Mk 11:12–14). In Mark's narrative the encounter with the barren fig tree holds an especially important and strategic place within the context of Jesus's visit to the Temple. It is important to take note of this intentional inclusion in the narrative when seeking to fully understand the message of this passage. Following the Temple incident, the fig tree is mentioned once more, emphasising that it was now entirely withered and dead (Mk 11:20–21). Jesus's actions towards the fig tree are widely regarded as crucial for understanding his actions at the Temple (Evans 1989:239).

It must be concluded that the Temple event was not an impulsive act by Jesus Christ, but a very deliberate and calculated undertaking (Lukito 1993:37). Within the whole of biblical revelation, it is without doubt a decisive and paradigmatic moment that completely altered God's relationship with his chosen people. Jesus's intention transpired shortly after He entered the Temple grounds and reached the Court of the Gentiles (Casey 1997:309). This dedicated area was the only area accessible to non-Jews and therefore symbolically served as a point of contact for Gentiles (non-Jews) to encounter God. Upon entering this outer space at the Temple, Jesus discovered a bustling marketplace (Mk 11:15). The commercial activities, such as money-changing and selling sacrificial animals – although relevant and necessary to Temple service – had eclipsed its primary religious function (Evans 1989:251). Although it served a purpose within the broader scheme of religious activities, it certainly obstructed a very crucial intended focus of the Temple as God's dwelling place. There was no room for non-Jews to meet God. Jesus immediately overturned the merchants' tables and expelled them from the premises, employing language steeped in Old Testament quotations that conveyed not only God's intended purpose for the Temple among his people, but also his profound disdain for the self-serving degradation of their religion becoming visible.

Old Testament references and their interpretation

Mark's narrative illuminates the entirety of Old Testament history by underscoring the continuity of God's purpose throughout the era and highlighting Israel's persistent failure to fulfil its missional purpose. By referencing Isaiah 56:7, Jesus affirmed that God intended his Temple to serve as a house of prayer for all nations. However, Jesus's citation of Jeremiah 7:11 condemned the Jewish people and their leaders for transforming the Temple into a 'den of robbers', where individuals pursued selfish desires at others' expense.

These Old Testament citations reveal that this transgression was not new, but rather a recurring sin throughout Israel's history. The reason for God's decisive actions against Israel's sanctuaries in the past remains relevant. This is where Mark's deliberate mention of the incident involving a barren fig tree comes into play. This event confirms a historical truth that symbolises Israel's continued spiritual barrenness and recurring religious delusion (Jr 7:4). It also becomes the central focus in Jesus's final visit to the Temple in Jerusalem.

It is crucial to note that Jesus's climactic diagnosis represents the culmination of a thousand years of Israel's spiritual delusion, where they were practically using God to serve their own interests. The same attitude that was already exposed and condemned by the Old Testament prophets is their default religious delusion. God would not allow it to continue.

Jesus's prediction of the Temple's destruction

Following His dramatic act in the Temple, Jesus's disciples sought clarification from Him, as recorded in Matthew 24:21. Jesus responded unequivocally, predicting that no stone of the Temple would remain intact; everything would be torn down. This prediction of a future catastrophe was fulfilled approximately 30 years later and serves as a stark reminder of previous events at Shiloh (Ps 78:60 and Jr 7:12–14) and the same Temple during earlier times (Lm 2:6). The final destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem occurred during the Jewish-Roman war, resulting in its complete devastation.

Closure

The Old Testament phase of the *missio Dei* highlights God's concern for both the nations and Israel, exposing Israel's failure to fulfil its role as God's chosen people in advancing his global mission. Throughout the Old Testament, as confirmed again by Jesus's last visit to the Temple in Jerusalem, Israel's misuse of the physical sanctuary – a symbol of God's redemptive presence – reveals their self-serving tendencies rather than their God-intended purpose of being a light to the nations. This pattern persists throughout history and into Jesus's time, as evidenced by his final entrance into and eventual last exit from the Temple in Jerusalem. His assessment of the situation within the Gentiles' court confirms the historical trend of Israel exploiting God's name for selfish gains, reflecting the pervasive religious distortion of the Second Temple Judaism during his earthly ministry.

Exploring God's engagement with his chosen people amid Western Christianity's existential crisis

Onset

In the contemporary Western world, the Christian faith grapples with a profound dilemma, one that extends beyond mere cultural consequences to the very essence of Western Christianity itself (Hall 1997:vii). Recognising the gravity of this crisis, Western theology has embarked on a rigorous

journey of research, seeking to comprehend its nature and implications fully (Ferreira & Chipenyu 2021). The aim of all this statistical investigation is not merely to quantify the scope and depth of the issue, but to lay the groundwork for empirically based solutions.

However, the assumption that an exhaustive understanding of the problem will yield unambiguous remedies may prove overly simplistic. The crisis confronting Christianity in the West is a multifaceted phenomenon, intricately interwoven with contextual factors and the complicated geo-political dynamics of our era. These diverse components contribute to the formidable challenges confronting the Christian Church in the West.

Embarking on the research endeavour of this article necessitates recognising a critical truth: in our quest for solutions, we risk neglecting to contemplate our own role as part of Western Christianity in exacerbating the problem. To address this crisis more effectively, we must humbly seek divine guidance, reflecting on the profound implications of why such challenges have emerged under God's providence. Through this prioritised introspection, guided by humility and reverence, we may attain a deeper comprehension of our predicament, and delineate a course towards meaningful resolutions.

The subsequent exploration of this article delves into a missionally focused historical overview of Christianity, tracing its trajectory from Jesus's departure from the Temple in Jerusalem to the emergence of the global mission of the Church over the past two millennia. This second phase of the *missio Dei* (*missio ecclesia*) will be evaluated within the corrective biblical perspective gleaned during the first phase of the *missio Dei*.

From the Temple of Jerusalem to the formation of global Christianity

Jesus's final departure from the Temple in Jerusalem not only draws attention to what He was leaving behind, but also highlights his purposeful progression towards God's transformative re-engagement with his chosen people. At the divinely appointed time, Jesus Christ commenced the revival and restoration of God's redemptive global mission. It is crucial to recognise that this re-engagement, as it was from the outset, is again centred on an altar – specifically now, the cross at Calvary. This 'altar' would ultimately fulfil all Old Testament redemptive symbols and prophecies, highlighting God's engagement with sinful humanity.

As in the Old Testament era, the sacrifice on this altar establishes redemption and initiates a renewed sacrificial commitment from all of God's people who partake in Jesus's redemptive atonement. Through death, God elicits new life. Jesus Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension were the consummate fulfilment of everything the Old Testament rituals indicated. He not only became the perfect sacrifice to secure final and complete redemption, but also constituted the

new Temple – the Church of the New Testament (Eph 2:20–22). Those incorporated sacrificially into his body ultimately become part of God’s mission. God’s chosen people are saved to serve.

The stage was now prepared for the second phase of the *missio Dei*: the mission of the Christian Church [*missio ecclesia*], equipped and dispatched by Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth, until the end of time (Ac 1:8). A significant missional and cross-cultural emphasis emerged within New Testament theology, demonstrating a deliberate shift from an Old Testament Jewish cultural context to a multicultural Hellenistic context. God used an ultimate Jew (Saul – Phlp 3:3–9) to become the apostle to the Gentiles (Eph 3:7), introducing Christianity as the sole true religion for all humanity.

The objective of this section of the article is to provide a missionally focused historical overview of Christianity, as it evolved into a world religion and a global reality over the past 2000 years. This succinct ‘missional audit’ aims to offer a novel and elucidating perspective on the existential crisis that Western Christianity is confronted with today.

Christianity and the development of Western culture

The history of Christianity represents a complex narrative spanning numerous decades, encompassing detailed accounts of various time frames, periods, and eras. It is beyond the scope of this article to address all theological nuances emerging during this extensive period in detail. This section of the article aims to avoid oversimplification of intricate historical and theological developments, striving to facilitate a more granular examination of historical trends, to provide a nuanced understanding of the continuous and interconnected developments in the history of Christianity. The innovative approach of Phyllis Tickle (2008, 2012b), which divides human history into 500-year time frames, proves beneficial to this endeavour. Furthermore, David Bosch’s (1991:181) employment of Hans Küng’s ‘historico-theological’ subdivisions, dividing the entire history of Christianity into six major paradigms, also offers valuable insights. These paradigms (ages or time frames) distinguish the subtle changes influencing Western Christianity in its transformation into Christendom (Western Cultural Christianity). The premise of this article posits that Christianity’s metamorphosis into Christendom constitutes the primary reason for God’s transformation in his engagement with Western Christianity – a claim this article seeks to substantiate.

1 CE – 500 CE: Early Christian Church and New Testament writings

The first age of Christianity marks a pivotal period characterised by the initial cross-cultural diffusion of the Christian faith. In this time frame, as described by Bosch’s apocalyptic paradigm, the early Christians embraced a thoroughly missional ethos, anticipating the imminent return of Jesus within their lifetimes. The persecution of the Jerusalem Church led to the ‘forced’ expansion of Christianity

through the known world of that time (Ac 8:1). The Jewish landscape of God’s chosen people changed completely with the tumultuous Jewish-Roman war, leading to the disappearance of the Jewish state. Notably, it was in the Gentile city of Antioch where believers were first dubbed ‘Christians’, signifying a notable transition in the Christian movement’s identity (Ac 11:26). The formation of the New Testament Church clearly reveals God’s transformative engagement with a chosen people for the sake of his global mission. The cross-cultural diffusion of God’s people saved the *missio Dei* (Walls 1996:18).

500 CE – 1000 CE: Hellenistic-Roman institutionalisation and state religion

The second age witnesses Christianity’s transition from a mission-focused movement to a more institutionalised entity. It is called the period of the ecclesiasticisation of salvation (Bosch 1991:217). The Hellenistic-Roman civilisation that Christianity now penetrated offered a total system of thought to the Christian faith, with the result that orthodoxy was established (Walls 1996:19). Institutionalised Christianity needed to define its beliefs within a new cultural context and amid growing intellectual challenges and even heresy. Christianity over time evolved into a state religion, ushering theological and missional changes (Young 2006a). In this age, the Christian faith developed from a persecuted minority to the instituted majority within the dominant cultural context of the Roman Empire.

1000 CE – 1500 CE: Barbarian and Western Europe

The third and fourth ages unfold against the backdrop of the so-called Dark or Middle Ages. The end of the Hellenistic-Roman phase of Christianity came with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire before the barbarians (Walls 1996:19). It can be equated with the end of a Christian civilisation. However, a new age (Walls 1996:19–20) not conditioned by a city-based literary, intellectual, and technological tradition, but by the circumstances of peasant cultivators and their harsh, uncertain lives developed. It was the start of the barbarian phase wherein Christianity became a people’s religion. According to Phyllis Tickle (2012b:14), this was the age when Christianity moved into monasticism that would protect, preserve, and characterise it for six centuries. The cultural gap that was bridged during this phase was just as great as that between Jew and Greek of the first phase. The Christianity of a classical civilisation became the faith of peasant cultivators, and the new idea and concept of the Christian nation was born (Walls 1996:20).

The fourth stage culminates as a natural development from the third. Christian practice and faith in its Hellenistic-Roman form interacted with the culture of the Northern peoples to produce a remarkably coherent Christian religious system across Western and Central Europe (Walls 1996:20). It was the birth of what can be called ‘territorial Christianity’.³

³Territorial Christianity: When the Great European Migration began, Europeans described the territory in which they lived as Christendom, a word that simply means *Christianity*. The historical roots of the application of the name of Christianity to a geographical area lie in the period of Europe’s conversion to Christianity, the centuries (the process indeed took many centuries) in which the various people groups of Europe communally adopted the Christian faith (Walls 2008:195).

Walls (1996:20) explains it as a new hybrid Western form of Christianity that became the dominant representation of Christianity, which was radically revised in the 16th century Reformation.

1500 CE – 2000 CE and beyond: Global domination and the Western world

The fifth and sixth ages herald a period of unparalleled global influence for Christianity, which was by this time firmly established within Western Europe. The age of expanding Europe was established. Christianity's influence shaped the foundational establishment and extension of Western civilisation profoundly. Rooted in Jewish tradition, Christianity played a pivotal role in moulding the modern world (Guinness 2022). The resulting Christian consensus within Western culture impacted political, cultural, economic, and religious dimensions of the Western world, granting Christianity an imperial status (Hall 1997:1). The West was referred to as the *Corpus Christianum* [Christendom]. In the wake of the Enlightenment (Bosch 1991:262–345) the Western missionary movement inserted into the momentum of European expansion, and colonisation increasingly aligned God's kingdom with the culture and civilisation of the West (Bosch 1991:271). Colonisation and Christianisation not only went hand in hand but were two sides of the same coin (Bosch 1991:275). Religious superiority spawned cultural superiority (Bosch 1991:291) and the cross-cultural 'transplantation' of Christianity (Walls 1996:21).

The sixth age started with a time that can be called the 'great confusion', or 'great betrayal' (Newbingin 1988:81) – exposing the failures of Western *Corpus Christianum* [Christendom]. It dawned when two devastating World Wars shook Western civilisation to its very core. The stage was set wherein the rapid and all-consuming process of Western globalisation and secularisation contributed to the challenging of traditional notions of Western religious dominance. Again, as in every age or phase described above, Christian civilisation within the current dominant cultural form seems to be in an existential crisis. Christendom has become suspect. A missiological diagnosis at the Mission Conference at Tambaram in 1938 already hinted at the fact that 'the birth of a new Christendom is needed at the very moment when the old Christendom seemed to be almost doomed to destruction' (Newbingin 1988:85). This is the start of the emergence of a new ecumenical paradigm (Bosch 1991:349–510) – highlighting the need for a cross-cultural transmission of Christianity (Walls 1996:22). This is exactly what the New Testament and Church and mission history is so clearly revealing and again demanding. God's transformative engagement with his chosen people for the sake of continuing his global mission.

Christendom and Western theology

Onset

Throughout the annals of Christian history, Walls (1996:53) identifies two distinct forces that are in tension with one another. The first is an indigenising principle, a

homing instinct that nurtures a sense of belonging within a culture. The second force is a 'pilgrim' principle that generates a feeling of displacement within the Christian community, as it perceives itself not fully at home in this world. These opposing principles influence the Church's vision: the indigenising force tends to localise it, whereas the pilgrim principle seeks to universalise it. Consequently, the Church may become excessively entrenched in and compromised to local customs and traditions, subsequently legitimising a particular group's economic, social, and political interests. This phenomenon is referred to as civil religion – a persistent danger when Christianity becomes firmly established within any given community (Walls 1996:54). It seems as if this is exactly the compromising challenge that Christianity succumbed to within Western culture. Murray's inquiry (2004:44) may be affirmed: 'Had the Empire co-opted and domesticated Christianity?'

Christianity becoming Christendom

Within historical perspective, it becomes noticeably clear that Christianity, from the late New Testament era onward, consolidated, and institutionalised. As it entered a new cultural context, the focus of the Church shifted from missional outreach to a more structured organisation with established rules and traditions (Dreyer 2013:2). It is also clear that every prevailing cultural milieu that Christianity entered during its historical path influenced, and shaped its development and its theological agenda.

When Christianity transformed from a movement into the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine (AD 313) and Theodosius I (AD 380), its sense of missionary purpose in relation to the world diminished (Shenk 2005:74). As the Church no longer faced a pluralistic context, the connection between mission and theology dissolved, leading to the emergence of an introverted theology (Laing 2009:12). As the gospel passed through the cultural framework of the Western Church, Christianity became a Western cultural expression of the gospel, laying the groundwork for Christendom. In its 'hybrid' (Walls 1996:20) form within Western cultural expression, it became 'tribal' and 'territorial',⁴ branching into competing 'Christendoms' (Murray 2004). It is also an era that was mostly characterised by internal debates among Christians and apologetic arguments against heretics (Bosch 1991:244). The Church ceased to perceive itself as a missionary community, shifting its focus from missional outreach to the pastoral care of its members. All ministerial energies focused its activities exclusively on Church maintenance, pastoral care, and teaching (Murray 2004:129).

4. I.e. Euro-tribal faith traditions (Van Gelder 2013:46). It is long past time for those of us in the West to reframe the place of the Euro-tribal faith traditions within the larger Christian story. The 16th century reformations are largely the clan history of Europe (Walls 1996:20). Religious nationalism is mini 'Christendoms' (Murray 2004:145). The Protestant reformers, as they were called, did not oppose Christendom who planned to establish rival churches, but their activities resulted in Christendom fragmenting into competing, then worrying, mini 'Christendoms' (Murray 2004:145).

Christendom and Western theology

The traditional understanding of missiology as the mother of all theology (Kähler 1971:190)⁵ and theology as knowledge of God (Farley 1983:xi) was never in doubt for nearly the first 11 centuries of Christian history (Mullin 2008:xii–xiii). With the advent of the Western University and the dawn of the Enlightenment,⁶ theology as knowledge (divine wisdom) changed into theology as a science.⁷ Theology became a technical and scholarly undertaking as systematic theology (Farley 1983:39). A Christianised form of the Enlightenment developed: a Christianity shaped to fit the Enlightenment worldview that became the dominant Western expression of Christianity (Walls 2002:223). The Enlightenment challenged traditional modes of thought, replacing it with critical and rational ways of understanding that facilitated the introduction of these modes of thought into culture, education, and religion. It persists even today in the form of ideals of scholarship, evidence, and criticism (Farley 1983:40). It changed the Western academy in such a way that modern Western theology is Enlightenment theology (Walls 2002:223).

Muggeridge (1980:17) is convinced that while previous civilisations were overthrown by barbarians from the outside, Christendom dreamed up its own dissolution in the minds of its intellectual elites. He is supported in his conclusion by Guinness (2022) who affirms the argument that Christendom's dissolution happened because the '*intelligentia*' of the West rejected the faith that made the West. The tragic results according to Walls (2002:222) is that the Western academy is as sick as the Greek Academy was in the early days of Christianity. He proclaims that in some areas it is corrupted (Walls 2002:223). Western Universities today are more and more becoming bound to Mammon⁸ because career-driven academics (Young 2006b) embark on research projects, focusing on their individual academic interests and the advancement of their professional careers (Walls 2002:222). The context of the Western academy is now more interested in profits than in prophets (Wells 1993:115).

Once the bastion of Christian thought and the representative of a Christian consensus within Western culture, the Western academy is now devoid of any substantial Christian influence within Western culture.⁹ Its theology is transformed into career-driven and professional scholarly pursuit, divorced

5. In changing situations, the church was forced to theologise. NT and patristic era – from mission to theology (Young 2006).

6. Enlightenment is a European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries in which ideas concerning God, reason, nature, and humanity were synthesised into a worldview, which gained wide assent in the West and that instigated revolutionary developments in art, philosophy, and politics. Central to Enlightenment thought were the use and celebration of reason, the power by which humans understand the universe and improve their own condition. The goals of rational humanity were knowledge, freedom, and happiness. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Enlightenment-European-history>.

7. Theology could only justify its existence if it adopted the same scientific precepts and methods as all the other disciplines that were no longer under the tutelage of the church. Religion lost the function that it had in an earlier era – that of explaining the world (Bosch 1995:18).

8. Western academy – much slavery to Mammon (Walls 2011:239).

9. The world of learning has become a mission field too (Walls 1996:152).

from any lived experience of the Christian Church. Missiology as a theological 'focus area' is relegated to an expendable extra (Bosch 1991:492), as 'real' scholars are not inclined to missions.¹⁰ Practitioners of mission on the other hand, have separated themselves from academic theology, which resulted in mission becoming merely a human response to human needs (Young 2006b). The distance between the Church and the academy has grown with only an academic compromise, wherein the academy endeavours to provide some type of professional training for Church ministry.

The consequence for the Christian Church is that an 'abnormal theology', namely a missionless ecclesiology, developed within Christendom theology (Laing 2009:11). Andria & Saayman (2003:503) calls it a defective ecclesiology, as neither the structures nor the theology of the established Western traditional churches is missional. Shaped by the legacy of Christendom (Guder 1998:5), the area of ecclesiology confronts the Western Church with its greatest problems (Guder n.d.:4). It is also confirmed by Shenk (2001:5) that the fundamental theological problem of the Western Church is an ecclesiology without mission. Theology therefore became scholarly reflection in the academy, and ministerial practice in the Church. The social space became completely emptied of theology (Wells 1993:108).¹¹

The results are indeed indicative of a significant issue. As Western civilisation faces an unprecedented crisis – 'the mother of all crises' (Kirk 1999a:157), also referred to as its 'civilizational moment' (Guinness 2022) – Western Christianity simultaneously finds itself in a state of total dissolution, described as its 'death throes' (Hall 1997:ix). More and more researchers are now speaking of the 'death' of Christendom. The pervasive influence of Western culture,¹² coupled with the all-encompassing process of secularisation, has led to Western Christianity's cultural compromise and ultimate and complete assimilation into the fabric of Western society. Its theological underpinnings served to validate and promote the expansion of Western culture; however, it ultimately succumbed to an extensive history of cultural compromise and even captivity (Guder n.d.:3). This decline originated from within the religion itself and has resulted in Christianity now facing the paramount crisis of being entangled in the epistemological confusion that is prevalent in Western culture. The epistemological crisis arises from an idolatrous faith in reason's capacity to regulate and comprehend the entirety of nature and experience (Kirk 1999b:170). Currently, the West faces a crisis of knowledge (Clayton 1999:78), characterised by epistemological uncertainty and a decreased confidence in establishing an adequate foundation for knowledge acquisition (Kirk 1999b:x).

10. When the sense of mission is dulled or diverted, the death knell sounds for Christian scholarship (Walls 2002:220).

11. The Enlightenment worldview wherein religion became a private affair. Its truth claims are relative and have no place in the public sphere of facts. Christian theology itself also contributed to this notion as it increasingly individualised, interiorised, ecclesiasticised and privatised salvation (Bosch 1995:34).

12. This warning by David Sills must be heeded: 'Be ever vigilant against the insidious slide toward an expression of Christianity that is more cultural than Christian' (Sills 2015:205).

'Christendom' as a 'religious delusion'?

'Christendom' today finds itself without any influence, and voiceless within a culture that has completely forsaken its spiritual moorings. It has become a mission-less Church within a cultural context that has now become a mission field. The tragedy is that in some way, it is still 'business as usual' within the academic environment of Western culture and the Christian ministry of the local Church. Western theology is still part of the academic context of the Western University, but relegated to a domesticated corner, where it tries to be culturally relevant,¹³ as the 'chief spiritual support' of the dominant society (Wink 1993:28), with an appealing spiritual message (2 Tm 4:3-4). It is also still trying to serve the Western Church with 'professional ministerial theological education', while the Church itself is desperately struggling in a survivalist-maintenance mode. The biggest problem, however, is that complacency and self-deception are the greatest dangers facing the Christian Church (Hall 1999:70).¹⁴

Andrew Walls (1996:145) is convinced that Western theology has been the least affected by the new global transformation of the Christian world. His concern is echoed by Lamin Sanneh (2003:3) who posits that Church leaders are unable to comprehend fully, still less to respond effectively to, the magnitude of the de-christianisation of the West and the Christianisation of the non-Western. It must therefore be concluded that the Western theological academy is not in any way able to give theological leadership to the Church of the 21st century (Walls 2011:239).

The paramount threat faced by the Christian Church is undoubtedly the peril of introversion (Hendrikus Berkhoff, quoted in Busch 2010:87). As soon as this becomes the prevailing attitude, the Church neglects its calling to partake in the *missio Dei*, leading to stagnation, and, consequently, disobedience. The fact of the matter is that a Church that abandons its missionary purpose ceases to fulfil its purpose (Bosch 1991:494). Although it might seem very harsh to express it, it must be done with a sense of sadness: Christendom's time is in effect over (Hall 1997:19). A sentiment echoed mainly from a neglected missional perspective. As God's mission continues with Christianity, now growing exponentially within a Third World context, Christendom is stuck in a 'bubble of self-delusion', mostly unaware of, but certainly unable to respond biblically to, the missiological challenges of our time (Buhlman 1974). It seems as if much of our ecclesiology and Church polity is informed by a process of corporate rationalisation, aimed at justifying the status quo (Hall 1997:7).

13. Western theology wherein missiology is still an expendable extra and to some extent associated with Practical Theology. Bosch (1991:496) identifies it as part of Western theology's myopic tendency, wherein Practical Theology is focusing on the pastorate without really engaging the apostolate (Bosch 1991:490). A recent development focusing on the development of 'Public theology', contributes to the 'confusion' (IWF).

14. 'We are now confronted, not only with the resistance of Western culture, but also with the impotence of the Western churches, crippled by the loss of confidence in the validity of the gospel, or by the creativity to change the forms of church life as cultural change require' (Escobar 2003:20).

This is the Great Emergence, or transformation that Phyllis Tickle (2012:76-77) refers to. Within the context of a generalised social, political, economic, intellectual, cultural shift during concomitant political, economic, and social upheavals (Tickle 2012:13), or about every 500 years the empowered structures of institutionalised Christianity, whatever it may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur (Tickle 2012:10).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Christian Church confronts its most significant perils in the forms of complacency and self-deception, which have directed it along a profoundly erroneous path, akin to the failures of ancient Israel (Smith 2010). Despite the lessons derived from Old and New Testament Scriptures, the Church has succumbed to a self-inflicted illusion, oblivious to its own decline and incapable of taking corrective measures. Just as divine intervention occurred in biblical times to expose and transform religious delusions, there is an urgent need for a similar intervention within Western Christianity, which has reached an irreversible point marked by the demise of Christendom. This downfall necessitates a fundamental shift in ecclesiology, leading to the acknowledgement of the Church as a missionary community, rather than an institutional vestige of a past era (Newbingen 2011:104).

Contemplating historical transitions of Christian heartlands from Jerusalem to Rome, Constantinople, and northern Europe, each yielding to external pressures or internal scepticism, it becomes evident that Christianity flourishes through adaptation and integration into new cultural contexts. Just as the gospel made a great escape before calamity struck at each turning point, the Church must adopt this principle of adaptation and renewal to navigate contemporary challenges. Consequently, the collapse of Christendom signals not the cessation of Christianity, but an opportunity for its revitalisation through a renewed dedication to its missionary essence, and a willingness to confront the realities of its own complacency and self-deception (Stafford 2021).

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

I.W.F. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration

An application for full ethical approval was made to the Theology Research Ethics Committee (TREC) and ethics consent was received on 4 April 2024. The ethics approval number is NWU-00907-24-A6.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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