



Where Are We Now? A New Mobilization Era

By **RYAN SHAW**

Ryan Shaw is the International Lead Facilitator of Global Mission Mobilization Initiative (GMMI)—www.globalmmi.net—a resourcing ministry equipping the Church for mission mobilization through tools, teaching, training and strategies. A fourth-generation message bearer, Ryan graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA) with a Master's in Intercultural Studies and is the author of 12 books, booklets, and Bible studies. He has traveled in a mobilization capacity to over 70 nations and lives with his family in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where GMMI has its International Base and Global Mobilization Institute. rshaw@globalmmi.net

God is working progressively in history, never doing everything at once. He is not in a hurry, having purpose in every era and century. There are ebbs and flows, seasons where particular foundations are laid, preparing for the next progression. As such, we want to consider where we are now in the mission movement, while also observing foundations that have previously been laid, revealing a progression into a new era toward the culmination of God's redemptive purpose being realized.

Three Helpful Grids for Interpreting Biblical and Redemptive History

Reflecting on Church history helps the global Church recognize how God has been gradually unfolding His master plan of redemption since initiating His far-reaching covenant with Abraham 4,000 years ago (Gen. 12:1–3).

To get the most out of Church and mission history, we need grids to help us interpret correctly. Careful study reveals in both biblical and redemptive history, from Abraham in Genesis 12 to the present, a brand-

new, noteworthy shift, important element into God's redemptive storyline, has occurred every 500 years without exception.¹ From a historical standpoint, this is quite remarkable as it never fails to show up. Let's quickly consider these 500-year eras in salvation history:

- Abraham as the beginning point of Israel: 2000 BC
- Moses, the Exodus, and the Law: 1500 BC
- King David and the tabernacle of David: 1000 BC
- Post-exilic Jewish restoration: 500 BC
- Incarnation of Messiah, Jesus Christ: 0 BC
- Institutionalization of the Church: AD 500
- East and West division of Christianity: AD 1000
- Protestant Reformation: AD 1500
- Present day: AD 2000

In addition, the great historian Kenneth Scott Latourette offers a grid of dividing Church history into three large periods of time.² At a macro level, these three follow the general pattern of the above 500-year eras:

1. AD 100-500 (the first five centuries)
2. The 1,000-year period called the Middle or Dark Ages
3. The last five centuries (500 years)

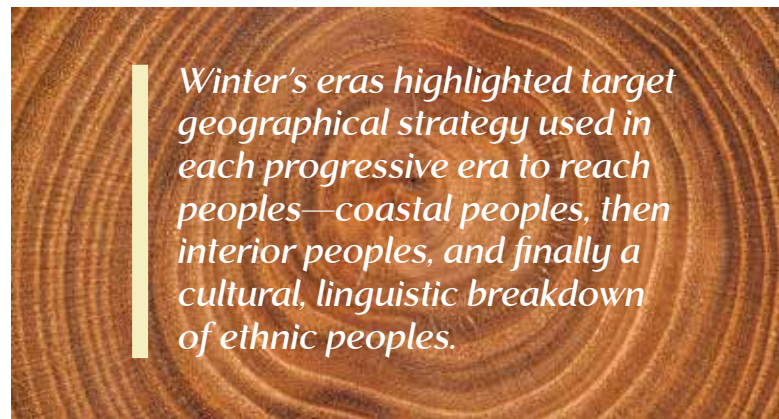
These two grids indicate that around the year AD 2000, a shift to a new major era in God's redemptive storyline may be happening.

The last 500-year era (AD 1500-2000) marked the gradual restoration of what was lost during the previous centuries (AD 100-1500) of spiritual decline. During these last 500 years, God has been accelerating His redemptive purpose, seemingly century by century. We find a unique dynamic during this era—the intertwining of revival, mission, and mobilization movements, together empowering the Church to progress in her calling.

It was during these last 500 years that the “modern mission movement” was catalyzed by the Spirit. Ralph Winter has helped the Church immensely with a third grid analyzing mission history since 1792.³ Winter points out there was a progressive mission emphasis bringing new understanding and strategic focus to the mission endeavor, highlighting three successive mission eras of modern Protestant mission history. Each era was catalyzed by a particular mission leader or leaders of the day. The first era (1792–1865) was to the coastlands (William Carey), the second era (1865–1935) was to inland peoples (Hudson Taylor), and the third era (1935–present) to unreached, hidden peoples (Cameron Townsend and Donald McGavran).

Adding to Winter's Third Era

Now that the previous 500-year era, which included an almost unbroken century-by-century progression of revivals, mobilization in the Church, and subsequent mission expansion is complete, what is the Spirit saying today? It has been debated whether a fourth mission era can be identified and added to Winter's three eras of Protestant mission history.



To consider this, it is important to differentiate what Winter's eras did and didn't focus on. Winter's eras highlighted target geographical strategy used in each progressive era to reach peoples—coastal peoples, then interior peoples, and finally a cultural, linguistic breakdown of ethnic peoples. There is no better strategic framework than the concept of ethnic people groups, distinguishing those who are reached (though unsaved) as opposed to unreached, in helping the

¹ I am indebted to the careful research of Wes Adams as he laid out the 500-year epochs of biblical and Church history, 87.

² Latourette, Kenneth S. *A History of Christianity*, 1081.

³ Winter, Ralph. 1992 “Four Men, Three Eras.” In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3.

global Church appropriately target those who have not rejected the Gospel, but have little access or opportunity to hear it. I dare not advocate moving on from this core missiological and biblical understanding of how to effectively reach peoples for Christ.

A New Era of “Who” in Sending

Having said that, Winter’s three eras focus on a target geographical strategy to reach people, overlooking “who” it was that was doing the sending. We can distinguish the missiological perspective of Winter’s eras with the mobilization, or “mobiological” viewpoint, of the three eras.⁴ Doing so reveals not necessarily a new era missiologically but a different understanding altogether related to who is being mobilized and activated in the mission of God.

Who across the global Church was being mobilized and activated was taken for granted as an assumption, as “Western sending” was all that was known in those eras. Yet, the who is necessary to distinguish because this has been shifting over the last 50 or so years, guiding us into a new era “mobiologically.”



During these last 500 years, God has been accelerating His redemptive purpose, seemingly century by century.

In the first mission era, William Carey sailed for India from Great Britain in 1792. The United States came into being in 1776, sending its first missionaries in 1812 (Adoniram Judson and team). Great Britain, the USA, and Canada were the primary mission senders for the next 150 years, including Winter’s second era with Hudson Taylor. With Winter’s third era (1934) targeting the hidden, unreached peoples, particularly the last fifty or so years in the era, an unmistakable mobiological trend of who was doing the sending emerged. The missiological necessity of

⁴ A term coined by Max Chismon of Simply Mobilizing. See his article in this periodical titled “Mobiology – An Introduction.” As missiology is the study of how peoples come to Christ, mobiology is the study of how the global Church is mobilized and activated in the mission of God.

reaching unreached peoples has not changed, but the mobiological emergence of who is being mobilized and activated informs us significantly.

As we are generally aware, over the last 50 to 60 years, emerging sending movements have come about from many non-Western, African, Asian, and Latin American national churches. As Jesus told Peter in Luke 5:4, *launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch*. The net of national churches emphasizing the Great Commission and raising up laborers is widening, and for the first time in recorded history, we have a truly global Body of Christ able to fulfill their assigned roles in the Great Commission.

The early days of the modern mission movement (1792–1865) reached the coastlands and Taylor and the student volunteers in the second era pushed inland, yet all that was done through the Western Church. Now, in the latter part of the missiological era of reaching every subgroup of unreached peoples, the work is in the hands of a truly global Church, and for the first time, a potential mobilization thrust.⁵ If the global Church can be awakened to its core identity, through multiplying mission mobilization movements, the fulfillment of the Great Commission is realistic in our generation, culminating in Jesus’ redemptive purpose in this age.⁶

The global Church will not be content allowing mission to remain merely on the periphery, sending few cross-cultural workers. God has a much greater vision of where He is taking His global Church—toward it becoming normalized for multitudes of local ministries educating, inspiring, and activating members. This becomes possible through restoring the central message of God’s redemptive purpose, and the Church’s role in it, among all humanity. This restored mobilization emphasis will, in time, produce the resulting scattering of a large percentage of a local ministry’s members (maybe even 20 percent)

⁵ Johnson, Todd, and Sandra Lee. 2013 In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Fourth Edition) Pasadena: William Carey Library, p. 387.

⁶ Learn more about multiplying Mission Mobilization Movements by obtaining a Facilitation Manual detailing their step-by-step development. www.globalmmi.net/product/mission-mobilization-movements-facilitation-manual

in message bearer teams to near and distant culture peoples.⁷ The whole Church will be engaged in her corporate responsibility of scattering the Gospel of the kingdom among all subcultures of all ethnic peoples with power. This has never happened before in Church and mission history. Jesus will have a truly global Church engaged in His Great Commission, and effective and strategic mission mobilization is the key to seeing it realized. This is the era we are moving into.


A New Era—A Truly Global Mobilization Movement

For this reason, some mobilization leaders suggest we have moved into a new, remarkable mission era—not in geographical or cultural people focus (as Winters’ eras brilliantly highlight), but in the Great Commission being emphasized across the whole global Church, the growing mobilization emphasis within the Church taking root.⁸ Steve Shadrach states, “If the third era is about taking the Gospel to all ethne, then the fourth era is about all the reached ethne remaining faithful to press on to finish the job. It could be that God is handing us a new template He wants us to operate from...in order to mobilize national believers to reach the unreached.”⁹ Shadrach then defines the goal of this fourth era, “A global mission mobilization movement in which the whole Church rises up to powerfully advance Jesus’ Great Commission to the ends of the earth. Each of us has a strategic part to play.”¹⁰

This takes place through a broader, comprehensive understanding of mission mobilization than traditionally grasped. Not merely recruiting a few cross-cultural workers but equipping the whole Church to be educated, inspired, and activated in their assigned roles in Jesus’ Great Commission. We are in a transition period. For the first time in history, we have a truly global Church empowered by the doctrinal and experiential restorations of the revival, mission, and mobilization

movements of the last 500 years. God has positioned His global people today for massive spiritual breakthrough among Frontier Peoples, if the mobilization emphasis can be realized among them.

Some argue the numbers of new traditional missionaries and the mission emphasis in national churches of traditional mission-sending nations are going down. Yet, the surge of growing mission awareness and vision among traditionally mission-receiving nations is increasing. This is only going to continue through comprehensive mobilization in the coming decades. This will also be affected as traditional Western finance models of mission-sending are tempered and transformed into biblical, Spirit-led sustainable means of scattering larger numbers of indigenous workers. Whereas most national churches don’t feel they can sustain sending the traditional (Western) way, they get excited when shown how to do so in ways even the poorest churches in the world can engage.¹¹

I believe this eye-opening “mobiological” understanding will progress to cultivating mission mobilization movements across the spectrum of church denominations and networks within multitudes of traditionally receiving nations. Churches empowered to experience firsthand the restoration of the core identity of the global Church as “God’s missionary people,” prioritizing the Great Commission within their local fellowships, engaging every believer in their assigned roles. These results can take place through a reenergized, redefined understanding of mission mobilization as calling the global Church to her core identity.¹² How is your ministry (network or denomination) progressing in this new mobilization era? 

Author’s Note—This article has been adapted from the author’s book titled *Rethinking Global Mobilization: Calling the Church to Her Core Identity*. The book lays foundations of a biblical missiology of mobilization while providing a practical framework to mobilize and equip the global Church in mobilization. The publisher, IGNITE Media, has given permission for portions of the book to be used in this article. Find more info about the book at RethinkingMobilization.com or search for it on Amazon.

7 “Message bearer teams” is an alternative term for “missionary” due to the baggage the term missionary has in many non-Western, Global South contexts.

8 Shadrach, Steve. “On Mission Virtual Conference 2020.” In *Missio Nexus*, www.missionexus.org/onmission2020stephen-2/.

9 Shadrach, Steve. 2018 “Mobilization: The Fourth (and Final?) Era of the Modern Mission Movement.” In *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 54:3, 8–13.

10 Shadrach, 2018.

11 We are referring to enabling message bearers to use their professions, skills and entrepreneurial abilities to derive an income while multiplying Church Planting Movements among unreached peoples. Learn more on pages 211–217 in *Rethinking Global Mobilization* by the author.

12 Learn more about this important subject in *Rethinking Global Mobilization: Calling the Church to Her Core Identity* (2022) published by IGNITE Media.

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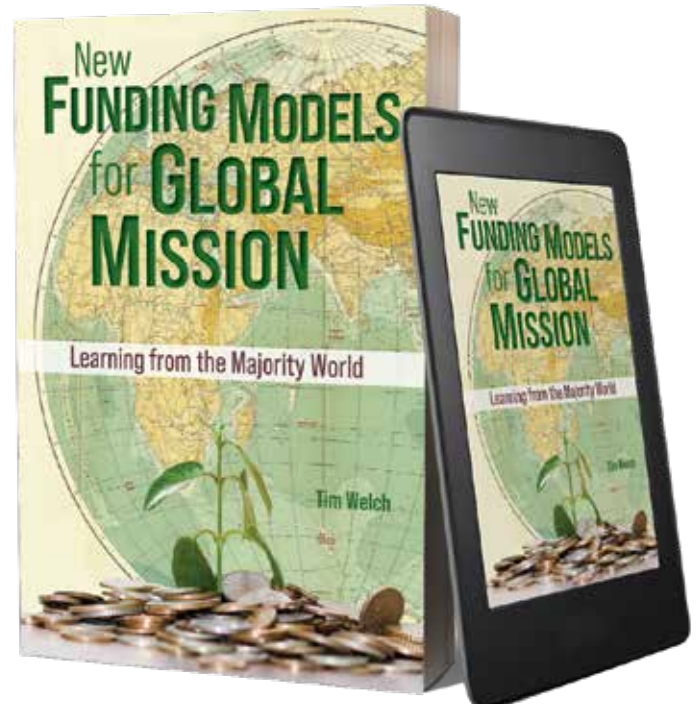
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