

God's Plan for the Fullness of Time: Overhauling Ralph Winter's "Ten Epochs" and "Three Eras" Models (Part III)¹

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Abstract

Over the past half-century, Dr. Ralph Winter (1924-2009) shaped the framework, goals, and strategies of evangelical missions more than any other single missiologist. Winter's monumental presentation at the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, entitled "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelism," steered the focus of evangelical missions away from converting individuals and their countries to reaching people groups. Winter argued persuasively that distances missionaries needed to traverse were cultural more than geographical. The concept of two ongoing structures he termed sodalities and modalities, along with his identification of modern missions' "closure" trait, are only two of many other seminal insights that reinforced Winter's expansive influence.

Related were Winter's two historical models that have influenced evangelical missiology. His "Three Eras of the Modern Missions Movement" has especially shaped Evangelicals' historical sensibilities; Winter's broader "Ten Epochs of Redemptive History" links with and supports the "Three Eras" model. Both of these models substantiate Evangelicals' expectation that today is both the final missions era and the age of Jesus's return. As such, Winter's "Three Eras" has provided evangelical missiologists and missions mobilizers a useful historical framework for inspiring fellow Christians to become involved in today's missions movement.

These "Eras" and "Epochs" models have undoubtedly galvanized evangelical missions with easily understandable historical metanarratives necessary to sustain any movement. They convey a passion and spirit to be cultivated and treasured. Even so, the models seemingly de-emphasize important biblical-theological themes. Moreover, due to contextual changes the models appear to have inadequate capacity for current historical sensibilities as well as the kind of theocentric and worldwide-collaborative character required for future mission movements.

Divided into three parts, this study conducts an overhaul of the two models to see what repairs and enhancements might be needed. Part I introduces the models, including their general context and basic components. Important influences on the models' formations are noted in Part II, leading into an analysis of the models' contextual moorings, traits, and limitations for wider use. Part III then considers viable courses of action, including commending features of more adequate historical models for Evangelicals to consider for moving forward. Recognition of the inherent limitations of all human constructs for explaining God's "plan for the fullness of time" (Ephesians 1:10) concludes the study.

Key Words: context, iterations, limitations, mobilization

Moving Forward

The primary purpose of this study's overhaul of Ralph Winter's "Ten Epochs" and "Three Eras" historical models has been, first, to understand the schemes more thoroughly. Unveiling the influences on the models' origins and developments has been required. So has pinpointing the models' contextual traits and limitations. Suggesting viable courses of action comes next.

One option would be to scrap or stop using one or both of the models. For some, the models' contextual limitations and blind spots might render them misleading at best and harmful at worst. Hence continuing to use either model as it is, even with supplemental qualifications, would no longer be tenable.

Another possibility would be to keep using one or both of the models but in renamed form. To pursue renaming the "Three Eras" model in particular, one thorny question concerns the existing name. In actuality, there have been several different titles of the model's essays and graphic representations. The study noted early on that Winter's most mature visual presentation of the original model was the 1999 "Three Eras of the Modern Missions Movement," which appeared in the essay entitled, "Four Men, Three Eras, Two Transitions: Modern Missions" (Winter 1999a). There are several earlier and later iterations, almost all having unique titles.

The more substantial question concerns whether or not to retain the explicit focus and purpose of the models, namely to mobilize U.S.-American (and Canadian) Evangelicals to participate in frontier missions to unreached peoples. Such participation involves becoming a mobilizer, mobilizing "the overseas churches," or going as a missionary "to the pioneer fields, at home or abroad, but especially at home" in North America. One look at the Lausanne Movement's range of "Issue Networks" is one indication of how Evangelicals worldwide understand Christian missions to have a broader meaning (Lausanne Movement n.d.). If, however, "The unreached peoples of the world must become the Church's greatest priority" (Lambert 2015), and if "missions" indeed means what "Winter patiently insist[ed], in countless writings and discussions, that ... the term *missions* [means] the initial cross-cultural breakthroughs in [unreached] people groups" (Coote 2000:162; emphasis original), and if U.S.-American (and Canadian) Evangelical Christians are at the forefront of frontier missions mobilization, then keeping the models intact, but with new names, is not only viable but preferable and arguably even obligatory.

Clarifying that focus and purpose of the essays and graphics would be important in renaming the models. The "Ten Epochs" model's main title, "The Kingdom Strikes Back," is certainly a viable way of conveying the overall redemptive theme of the essay. As Winter himself noted, "This would make a good title for the Bible itself were it to be printed in modern dress" (Winter 2009a:7), even though the immediate connection with a blockbuster movie may have dissipated four decades later. As noted at various places earlier, however, there are inherent problems in the existing subtitle, "Ten Epochs of Redemptive History." This title is used for the graphic as well, implying that all of redemptive history has progressed as depicted—including the impending end of history. Clearer would be something like, "A Memory Device for Detecting Historical Patterns since Abraham for Mobilizing Today's U.S.-American Evangelicals (and Those They Mobilize) for Frontier Missions."

In the case of the "Three Eras" model, one new name for both the essay and graphic might be, "Ways for Today's U.S.-American Evangelicals (and Those They Mobilize) to Detect Historical Precedents in Parts of the Western Protestant Missions Movement for Focusing on the Current Need to Cross New Frontiers in Cross-Cultural Missions to Non-Western Unreached Peoples." That title would be a bit unwieldy, but it more accurately and constructively conveys the model's contents and purpose than either "Three Eras of the Modern Missions Movement" or "Four Men, Three Eras, Two Transitions: Modern Missions" has conveyed and still does.

Having considered the options of recasting and renaming the models, next comes exploring the possibility of rebuilding them.

Before Rebuilding

One preliminary matter concerns the mode of presenting rebuilt models and their features: conceptually-verbally-textually (“in writing”), graphically, a combination of the two, or some other creative way. Both of Winter’s models seem to have been formulated first conceptually-verbally-textually, with related graphics emerging early for stimulation, consolidation, and presentation. This study has attempted to consider the two models’ textual and graphic presentations in tandem, often rotating between the two to procure as much relevant content as possible. Probing for conceptual, personal, and contextual underpinnings has also been an important component of the approach.

For the present purposes, verbal-textual will be used, while graphic presentation will not be pursued except when verbal description of mental pictures might be needed.

A second preliminary item concerns whose input should be considered most heavily. Ralph Winter’s input is a given, as are the panoply of inputs from those who influenced him. A survey of other models is not in view, but the range of people in various orbits of the study’s awareness—especially people to whose input English-speaking evangelical missions circles heretofore might have been inadequately exposed—are certainly available to be considered.

One more preliminary matter is not so much “preliminary” as it is consolidating: What, after all, is the “heartbeat” of Winter’s two historical models? After examining several trees in Ralph Winter’s forest of redemptive and missions history, what is the best description of the forest as a whole? To switch metaphors again, what makes the models’ clocks tick?

A suitable candidate is reaching the unreached peoples of the world. UPGs constitute “the ends of the earth” and the “final frontier” in the models’ current epoch/era of redemptive and missions history. Mobilizing Christians to join the massive task of reaching the world’s remaining UPGs was, after all, the purpose for Winter engineering his essays and accompanying diagrams. If enough Christians would give themselves to the monumental but completable task of frontier missions, the current epoch/era would be the final epoch/era of missions (and perhaps all) history.

Further consideration, however, reveals the models’ life-giving heartbeat to be more fundamental, cosmic, and comprehensive. Reaching the world’s UPGs may be the models’ final frontier, but stretching through, underlying, and arching over all the models’ epochs and eras is nothing short of “the restoration of all creation and the reglorification of God,” to use Winter’s own phrase articulated in 2005 (Winter 2008b:284). That divine mission is what “The Kingdom Strikes Back” means: “the grace of God intervening into history in order to contest the enemy who temporarily is ‘the god of this world’” (Winter 1981e:138). Later versions of the essay add, “so that the nations will praise God’s name” (Winter 2009a:8). God’s plan for restoring all creation and “reglorifying” his name is to bless Abraham’s family, then subsequently other nations, all of whom are enlisted into God’s missions army to share that blessing with other nations (Winter 2009a:8). While Winter identified the final frontier in the final missions era to be the remaining UPGs, and while he saw U.S.-American Evangelicals as standing at the kairos of being mobilized to lead the charge in the final missions battles, the historical models’ enlivening spirit was the ultimate victory of God’s creation being restored to him and bringing all glory to God alone.

It is no wonder then that John Piper quickly sensed that spirit and used Winter’s models in their earliest stages in conveying his own emphasis on God being worshipped among all nations.

Rebuilding the models, using existing and new components in creating a new design, would involve conveying, in some form or fashion, Winter's models' same essence and purpose.

Seven Elements

In proceeding to consider rebuilding Winter's historical models, this study sees seven components that can strengthen Winter's fundamental purpose of creation's restoration and divine "reglorification" while shedding constraints of Winter's missions-mobilizing models that coalesced almost a half century ago.

1. The first trait is for any model to be explicitly "triune-theocentric." Winter mentioned God's gracious intervention in the world, including through "the appearance of the good Person in the center of the story" (Winter 2009a:8). Winter also noted how God has always preferred that his blessed people voluntarily obey him in missionary outreach, "but where necessary, He accomplished His will through involuntary means," for example through Joseph, Jonah, and the nation as a whole through the exile (Winter 2009a:9). As for the present day, "If we in the West insist on keeping our blessing instead of sharing it, then we will, like other nations before us, have to lose our blessing for the remaining nations to receive it. God has not changed His plan in the last 4,000 years.... God can raise up others if we falter" (Winter 2009a:23). God's ultimate control is evident in "The Kingdom Strikes Back" model, but new models need to be more explicitly God-centered.

Pointing out this needed component resembles the mid-twentieth-century corrective toward a *missio Dei* paradigm. In the wake of two devastating European wars and the seeming end of missions in China, Western mission leaders began to realize that their focus and confidence had been on their mission strategies and activities at the expense of acknowledging and trusting God to accomplish his mission. For this study, even more so than the "Ten Epochs" model, the "Three Eras" model of modern missions history emphasizes the role and responsibility of Christians' insights and activities—to the point of crowding out God's role and responsibility. Restoring the world is ultimately and in actual effect God's work. We Christians can thus wholeheartedly and tirelessly throw ourselves into missions service because our hope and confidence are in God.

In one sense this point is a matter of emphasis. As described earlier, when noting the absolute necessity of prayer for frontier missions and acknowledging that missions is a spiritual battle, Winter still laid the burden on Christians in missions service: "[W]e know that it is our fight, not just His, and that He is fighting with us" (Winter 1996:64). However, the burden is God's more than ours as his weak and frail people. A "triune-theocentric" model would reverse Winter's war-language to "Missions is God's fight, not just ours; we are fighting with him."

One implication of a "triune" theocentric historical model is that commitment to God as triune—as confessed in early Christian history by various Christian traditions within differing cultural-linguistic and imperial settings—would be affirmed. Another implication is that the essential roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would be acknowledged and trusted. While the three divine Persons' roles overlap and interrelate, and while flexibility among different peoples in Christ's body of theological understandings would also need to be acknowledged, the Father's creation and caring rule, the Son's redeeming the world as Prophet-Priest-King, and the Spirit's comforting, guiding, and empowering God's people all need to be recognized and trusted.

It is difficult to find enough of such a “triune-theocentric” emphasis in either the “Ten Epochs” or “Three Eras” models. Jesus’s main role seems to be that of taking away the Great Commission from Israel and assigning it to others (Winter 2009a:9-10). In a mid-1980s presentation entitled “Christology and Missions?” Winter’s main concern is that missionaries not impose traditional creedal formulations about Christ’s Person and Work, crafted in settings alien to those of the people whom the missionaries are serving, but instead allow the Bible to speak for itself to people and follow Jesus’s example of love and service (Winter 1985d:297-299). Those points are well taken but are too reductionist at the expense of acknowledging and trusting the triune God and his work.

A triune-theological historical model will present God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as having been actively working throughout all of history to restore the world to how God wants it to be and to bring glory to God for his gracious work of redemption. God promised at humankind’s earliest rebellion to defeat Satan through a coming Redeemer (Genesis 3:15), a covenant promise fulfilled in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. The triune God will also be presented as continuing that work, including through the Spirit graciously enlisting, empowering, guiding, and using us who are his people in mission service, until whenever he re-creates the final new heaven and new earth. Such a model is not simply academic, scientific, and impractical: it breathes passion for God’s covenant-fulfilling work in the world (and in unseen realms, throughout the cosmos) and beckons people to trust, follow, and serve him wherever and however he wishes.

2. A second component of a rebuilt historical model is that it be comprehensively world-historical and—in the positive and constructive meaning of the term—ecumenical. No model should try and cover everything, but neither should it inherently exclude parts of God’s world. The Bible includes all peoples within God’s concern and rule, either explicitly or by implication. Landmark events in various parts of God’s world also are noted. Any historical model of God’s mission should follow that example and not frame missions history in reference to historical junctures and figures from only one sector—in the present case, Great Britain and the United States of America.

Related is the historical unfolding and development of redemptive history. In the “Ten Epoch” model, the first half depicts Israel’s commission to share God’s blessing with other peoples, followed by the second half’s depictions of nations other than Israel being blessed so they can in turn bless other peoples. Rather than such a disjointed two halves of redemptive history, however, God’s fulfillment of his promise to redeem his people in Christ involves expanding Old Israel into the worldwide, international people of God. A rebuilt model of redemptive history will convey such an organic progression into God’s international people.

In reading the Old Testament, one common oversight Christians can make is how God deals directly with peoples other than Israel, be they Ninevites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Canaanites, Moabites, Philistines, or many others. Israel or Israelites never take God to these other people. Rather, God brings Israel or individual Israelites to these various people as part of his dealings with them. God also works through non-Israelites in his dealings with Israel.

The same is true with people in the New Testament. Whether with people who encounter Jesus, or years later people who encounter Apostles or other followers of Jesus, God has been overseeing and dealing with their lives, “that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27)—particularly through God’s bring Jesus’s witnesses to them. Cornelius, the Ethiopian eunuch, Romans, the Wise Men, Greeks in Antioch—the list is almost endless of people in the New Testament among whom God had always been at work.

Similarly, a reconstructed history of redemption/missions model should depict all sorts of people to whom God brings his messengers, as well as the messengers (missionaries) whom God leads to them. Recipients of mission initiatives are just as vital to gospel communication as are the messengers; and, recipients' vantage points are at least as important as those of the missionaries. God's dealings are with both gospel conveyors and receivers, and neither is a passive object of the others' targeted actions. Historical models somehow need to convey that interaction—not just action and inaction.

Moreover, various Christian groups—newer and older, “Eastern” and “Western,” larger and smaller—need to be included in a new missions historical model that purports to be general. A depiction of “modern missions,” for example, would somehow need to include newer independent movements, megachurches, Orthodox, Charismatic, various Protestant, Catholic, and others that God has been directing and continues to use. As much breadth as the “Ten Epochs” model has, Orthodox traditions do not appear, for example. Neither do Roman Catholics in the “Three Eras” model, including post-Vatican II when monumental missions adjustments were implemented. Especially if a model is not identified as focusing on a particular tradition, proper ecumenical inclusion is important for depicting the breadth of God's use of all of his people throughout all of his world.

Winter's and others' emphasis on frontier missions that are focused on UPGs is well taken. An allegedly general, comprehensive historical model that intends to convey that focus should clearly convey that intention, even as it also carries the first two components just described.

3. A third component is that of multiple agents of mission. For its part, “The Kingdom Strikes Back” goes to great lengths to convey a wide variety of mission agents throughout Western Christian history. Additionally, in the essay's brief description of the “first half” of redemptive history, inclusion of four “mission mechanisms” operative in creating cross-cultural missions interaction is helpful: “1) going voluntarily, 2) involuntarily going without missionary intent, 3) coming voluntarily, and 4) coming involuntarily” (Winter 2009a:9). These “mechanisms” appear somewhat in the essay's various accounts of “second half” interactions, but there is little indication of their place in the “Three Eras” scheme about modern missions. Per the “Three Eras” model, missionaries and mission agencies are the only active agents at work. Moreover, ostensibly white men have been the only leaders and formulators of new approaches or “eras” in missions.

Explicit space needs to be given to the rich tapestry of Christ's servants who have led and served and recent generations of missions. That colorful array of Christ's servants has included women and girls, people of all sorts of ethnicities and nationalities, poor and wealthy alike. God has always used all kinds of people in various roles to convey his love and grace to others. The “involuntary going” of God's people has always been vital, as in the Israelite slave girl testifying in Naaman the Syrian's household (II Kings 5:2-5) or those early Christians fleeing persecution in Acts 8:1-4 and 11:19-20. Models of what has occurred need to depict multiple agents in Winter's various “mission mechanisms” categories.

Perhaps Winter's concerted efforts to promote the legitimacy and importance of mission sodalities (agencies and other so-called “parachurch” ministries) caused him to focus on those who go voluntarily and intentionally as missionaries, as well as on the related infrastructure. The Spirit of God's guidance and use of Christ's witnesses who are refugees, immigrants, students, laborers, and others in diaspora has been part of reaching the unreached and modern missions in general.

4. Fourth, overhauled historical models should convey the messy and multidirectional character of missions interactions. Missions have never come or gone unidirectionally, including in modern times. How, for example, would the mid-nineteenth-century missions movement of Twi-speaking Akan people receiving Jamaican Christians, who had intentionally moved inland in the Gold Coast in West Africa, fit in a rebuilt historical model? What about Korean slaves of Japanese invasions in the 1590's becoming Christian through Japanese Christian witness? Or Korean Christians being forcibly moved to Japan during the 1910-1945 Occupation? Surely William Wade Harris reaching thongs along the southern West African coasts and Russian Orthodox missionary work among Alaskan unreached peoples would need space as well.

5. A fifth needed element is reconfigured periodization and dating. Modern missions progressed in fits and starts, differently in different settings, and with revivals and declines at varying moments—but not in a mathematically symmetrical manner. Redemptive history has progressed more organically, through covenant-promises and fulfillment. Also, especially until the global proliferation of the Western-Gregorian calendar, different peoples around the world have had their own periodization and dating systems, be they lunar, generational, by ruler's reigns, or seasonal—all of which were used in biblical times as well. Use of such contextually determined periods as “centuries” and “decades” should not mindlessly be assumed.

Furthermore, the question of when “modern” missions began—when Spain, Portugal, and other Western nations sailed more widely, when the British and Russian Empires started competing more intensely, when Pentecostal or “Spirit-empowered” Christianity began to proliferate (Empowered21 2020) during the heyday of Western and Japanese imperialism, or by some other single marker or constellation of landmarks—is another vitally important consideration.

Whether or not to include a “closure” element by labeling the current period (along with whatever other label might be used) as “final,” which inevitably would carry eschatological connotations, is its own separate consideration within the aspect of periodization and dating.

6. Sixth, the theme of suffering in Christian witness—in Greek μάρτυρας or “martyr”—is central enough to need explicit attention. Suffering almost always accompanies missions efforts in the Bible. That has been true throughout Christian history as well, including in recent generations. In fact, Winter's central stress on the “reglorification” of God connects with suffering, not just blissful light. Just as Jesus was “lifted up” both in majesty and in his suffering, so have Christian missions both accompanied the might of economic, military, and political power and suffered the indignity of martyrdom and humility (Jennings 2010:229).

7. A seventh element of a rebuilt historical model of missions involves interacting with public matters. Interestingly, Winter moved in this direction in his later years with his passion about “Kingdom Mission” and the eradication of disease. Perhaps that shift was in part a rebound from moving away from concern about socio-political, structural economic, and other public matters with his mid-1970s concentration on “people groups” as the *ethne* of Scripture, at the exclusion of political *nations* as well. It could have been that not only Winter but many Western evangelical leaders wanted to leave public matters behind altogether after the shock of China's mid-twentieth-century turn toward communism and its expulsion of expatriate missionaries, followed by a shift within the World Council of Churches toward wrestling with unjust political and economic matters. Even with the importance of focusing on ethno-linguistic people groups, God's ongoing dealings with the “nations” of the world include countries, be they Zimbabwe, Japan, China, the

United States of America, or any other. However evangelical mission leaders navigate involvements in such matters, God's wider mission involves working in all affairs of his world (Jennings 2020).

In any case, frontier missions among unreached peoples also affect and are affected by public realities. For example, recipients of Jesus's cross-cultural ambassadors see them in association with public identifiers, usually nationality. How groups and communities live and interact within socio-political contexts is of fundamental importance and needs some sort of place in historical missions models.

This study understands overhauled versions of Winter's "Ten Epochs" and "Three Eras" to be viable. Such rebuilt models should consider incorporating the seven elements of triune-theocentric, world-historical/ecumenical, various agents, messy-multidirectional, reconfigured periodization, suffering, and public realities. That kind of model would more appropriately continue the "Kingdom Strikes Back" and "Three Eras" heartbeats of creation's restoration and divine reglorification, including the particular focus of unreached peoples being restored to their estranged Creator.

Proceeding further with an actual overhaul of the models must be taken up beyond this study. Others' input is needed. Collaboration between various types of people must also take place. Traits of recast models have been suggested. Attempting to move beyond that here would be folly and run counter to the group effort required.

All Models' Inadequacies

This study necessarily concludes on a tentative note. Just as the "Ten Epochs" and "Three Eras" models of redemptive history and modern missions have never been beyond revision, so is any human attempt at depicting history—even if the intent is expressly to *use* history—in some way inadequate. Accuracy, comprehensiveness, and usefulness are always elusive. Especially when depictions include events particularly dependent on divine involvement, human limitations become all the more pronounced and inevitable.

God's mysterious Providence makes even retrospects tentative. Any historian, whether amateur or professional, views and explains a period, process, movement, person, event, or any other phenomenon from within a particular context and tied to certain interests. "God's plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10) is comprehensive enough to deny any human historical depiction an achievement of full adequacy.

Dr. Ralph Winter's laser focus on Evangelicals' obligation to cross the frontiers of unreached people groups compelled him tirelessly to use all means possible to mobilize his fellow U.S.-American Christians for frontier missions. His "Ten Epochs" and "Three Eras" depictions of redemptive history and of the modern missions movement, incomplete and unintentionally misleading as they have been, have helped to achieve his mobilization objective. Two generations after the models' inceptions, this study's partial overhaul has shown that the time and context for scrapping, renaming, or—preferably—rebuilding have come.

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