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The "New" Comparative Theology as New Frontier in Interreligious Engagement and Christian Witness

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Introduction

In his introduction to Fuller Seminary's Missiology Lectures on the theme, "Evangelism in a Post-Christendom Era," Korean American evangelical scholar Soong-Chan Rah speaks of a "truth pursued" approach as an alternative to a "truth possessed" approach to evangelism (2023). The latter believes the task of evangelism to be that of *dispensing* truth, as though it were a commodity one could possess, while the former seeks to follow truth in community, wherever truth might lead. As Rah argues, a "truth possessed" approach is typical of despotic rulers and colonial regimes, while a "truth pursued" approach maintains the ontological reality of truth—and even specifically of truth incarnate (John 14:6)—but believes that such truth beckons us always beyond ourselves. In this paper, I argue that the 'new' comparative theology (hereafter CT) is a mission practice at the frontiers of evangelical missiology that accords well with a "truth pursued" approach to evangelism and mission. To make my case, I explore the need for CT, considering the persistence of non-Christian religions; its history and distinguishing features, defined by a 'bold humility' toward religious Others; its function as a mission practice facilitating two-way contextualization; and its potential as a form of Christian witness, illustrated through an example of the 'new' CT in the longstanding Christian-Muslim debate about the nature of divine revelation.

I. Why Do We Need CT?

Let us begin by grounding ourselves upon a simple definition. Comparative theology is a confessional discipline of interfaith inquiry that "[rethinks] aspects of one's own faith tradition through the study of aspects of another faith tradition" (Clooney 2007, 654). We will unpack this definition in due course. For now, let us consider that in the *Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies* (2022)—an impressive compendium of over 40 contributions from diverse global and ecumenical missiologists—the editors name the enduring desire to live faithfully alongside and engage productively the non-Christian religions as a leading edge of mission studies for Christianity's third millennium. In light of this, the editors assert that "comparative theological analysis remains a priority among missiologists" (Kim and Fitchett-Climenhaga 2022, 11). While the observation is significant, it prompts us to ask why doing theology comparatively should hold such priority. If Christians have been practicing theological reflection for centuries without an explicit need for cross-religious comparison (as the story goes) then why would we need it now? Furthermore, and more to the point of this paper, in what ways is comparative theological reflection a *missional* practice in a specifically *evangelical* sense? In other words, why do evangelical missiologists need CT? Finnish theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen responds, "The simple answer to this question is that we need comparative theology because the world in which we live in the beginning of the third millennium is deeply and widely religious!" (2020, 1). Let us unpack this assertion with some data.

The Context for Comparative Theology: The Persistence of Non-Christian Religions

The data indicate that the Christian population vis-à-vis world population has changed little since 1910 – the year of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference – holding at roughly one-third of the world population. In fact, the numbers have declined slightly over time, from 34.5% in 1900 to 33.2% in 1970, and further to 32.3% by mid-2021 (Zurlo and Johnson 2022, 731).[1] This has rightfully dampened the triumphalist tone of the World Missionary Conference's motto, "The evangelization of the world in this generation!" Consider the statistics more closely: by consulting the most recent data from the *World Christian Database* (Zurlo and Johnson 2024), one discovers that while about a third of the world's population count themselves within the Christian church

[1] Although several keynote speakers at the recent Fourth Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Seoul-Incheon, South Korea (September 22-28, 2024), expressed concern that the Christian share of the global population is declining, this trend is not a recent development.

(2.55 billion), nearly a quarter belong to the Muslim *ummah* (1.93 billion). Hindus, numbering 1.1 billion, account for about 14 percent of the global population, followed by Buddhists at slightly less than half that figure. Jews number fewer than 15 million (0.2% of the global population), while a much larger number—828 million (10.6% of the global population)—adhere to what some have called 'folk religions.'[2] While those who identify as atheists and agnostics account for 11.4% of the global population (891 million), many hold some form of spiritual belief or engage in spiritual practices. This data corroborates Kärkkäinen's assertion that our world is currently more religious than ever, even if forms of secularism are also flourishing (2020, 2).

Religions are experiencing growth and vitality, and they are in continuous interaction with one another. Despite three-quarters of religionists living in regions where their religion holds a majority position, such as Hindus in India, religions do not exist in isolation. Followers encounter one another in various settings, including homes, workplaces, markets, schools, and places of worship. Moreover, globalization and migration have brought religious Others into closer proximity to Global North Christians than ever before; the new frontier of interreligious engagement thus lies no longer on a distant mission field but within our own neighborhoods. Therefore, the desire to engage robustly with other religions remains of central missiological significance, even as fresh approaches are needed.

This reality underscores the need for Christian ministers, theologians, and missiologists to cultivate a capacity to know about other faiths and the ability to compare perspectives with both rigor and empathy. The brief statistical analysis serves as a clear call to action for missiologists and theologians alike to earnestly delve into the views, practices, and doctrines of other religions. The 'new' CT offers one such approach to interreligious engagement while reimagining (faithfully, I argue) Christian witness among the religions. It is a demanding yet crucial missiological practice that involves a measure of commitment to learning about at least one religion other than Christianity. But as Kärkkäinen observes, "Willingness to do that takes the theologian out of the safe zone of her own tradition and makes her vulnerable, but at the same time it opens up whole new ways of engaging the complex world around her" (2020, 2). It is time to take a closer look at the vulnerable yet expansive practice of comparative theology.

[2] Using the *WCD* for the year 2020, I have included in this count 'Chinese folk-religionists,' 'ethnic religionists,' 'new religionists,' and 'spiritists.'

II. What is the 'New' CT?

Historical Development of Theological Comparison

To be sure, comparative learning is not a new phenomenon; interreligious exchange is fundamental to Christianity's biblical roots and early development. According to the narrative in Acts 17, St. Paul sought to establish common ground at the Areopagus for his gospel witness. In doing so, the apostle honored Greek religion in his own way. Similarly, the theologians of Christianity's earliest centuries were often steeped in their knowledge of Greek and Roman philosophy and religion. While often pugnacious, their articulation of Christian distinctiveness was nevertheless mediated through a deep appropriation of the intellectual and spiritual imagination of their Hellenistic context.[3] For instance, as is well-known, the theological term *homoousios* ('of the same substance') emerges as a philosophical construction not found in the New Testament but which became instrumental for making sense of Christ's eternal sonship. This blend of external appropriation and internal critical debate has been integral to the development of Christian thought, starting from its earliest encounters with Greek philosophy.

It is evident, then, that embracing insights and practices from beyond the Christian tradition doesn't necessarily diminish Christian beliefs or worship but can rather serve as a catalyst for innovative and enriched expressions of faith. Indeed, the history of Christian missionary encounters with other religions is marked by deep reflection upon, and thoughtful appropriation of, insights from other religious traditions in the promulgation of the Christian message. Drawing upon a long list of exemplars, the 16th century Jesuit Matteo Ricci, 19th century Baptist missionary Hudson Taylor, and the 20th century Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones, can be seen as case studies in this regard.

Distinguishing Features of the 'New' Comparative Theology

However, in the decades after Vatican II (1962-65), an invigorated theological openness among Catholic thinkers to the teachings and practices of other religions proved fertile soil for a 'new' genre of religious comparison that came to be referred to as the practice of comparative theology. This 'new' CT is defined by the Jesuit Francis Clooney, a pioneer in the practice, as…

[3] Indeed, some theological circles now commonly criticize the extent of Hellenic influence on early Christian theology.

> acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is done for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition. (Clooney 2010, 10)

What makes this form of theological comparison novel is its degree of vulnerability toward other religions, distinguishing it from the conversion-centric engagement of traditional missionary practice (Lee 2024, 220–21). At the same time, Clooney emphasizes the *confessional* nature of comparison. The task is undertaken in an Anselmian sense of "faith seeking understanding" that involves a process of reflection upon the sources of other religions from within the theological framework of the theologian's "home" tradition. The explicit foregrounding of the theologian's religious commitments distinguishes CT from the earlier field of comparative religion, which purports to take up a positivist and 'objective' view of religions rooted in scientific observation rather than confessional theological commitment. In CT, by contrast, the confessional dimension constitutes a prerequisite for venturing forth across interreligious borders.

Methodologically, Clooney forefronts the "seeking" dimension of faith, rather than faith in terms of what is certain, non-negotiable, or absolute. Comparative theology is thus a *constructive* task that embraces the possibility of attaining "fresh theological insights" through making extended visits, as it were, as guests to the "homes" of other religious traditions. This openness allows for a *vulnerable* encounter with the religious Other, without which constructive reflection would be greatly hindered. According to comparative theologian Marianne Moyaert, "Vulnerability is one of the key words in Francis Clooney's comparative theology project" (Moyaert 2012, 1144). She observes that the vulnerability central to CT disrupts the defense mechanisms that obstruct the possibility of being affected and touched by the other religion. Such vulnerability, I argue, building on Moyaert's point, serves as an alternative to a classic theology of religions in which a liberal pluralism, on the one hand, flattens out genuine difference among religions, while a conservative exclusivism, on the other hand, rejects the possibility of discovering salvific insight among other religions. According to both views, the religious Other is seen as a problem that can and should be solved, either by retreating to the security of sameness (pluralism) or by distancing otherness (exclusivism). Both approaches, then, can be seen as "exponents of a desire for control" that minimizes opportunities for vulnerable relational exchange. In contrast to this,

"comparative theology can be regarded as a form of vulnerable theology" (Moyaert 2012, 1145).

In this regard, rather than a popularly held view of vulnerability in the modern West as a weakness to be overcome, vulnerability here denotes "the common human *capacity* to be affected and affect in turn," whereas to be invulnerable is to be "*indifferent, irresponsible, inaccessible, inapproachable*…inhuman" (Moyaert 2012, 1146; emphasis is Moyaert's). That human aspect of vulnerable theology—and also of comparative theology—is marked here by its *affective* component. For instance, in a Muslim approach to CT, Mona Siddiqui demonstrates this capacity to be affected through her encounter with the Christian Other by reconstructing why the cross is so important to her Christian friends as a revelation of God's kenotic love. She then reflects: "The cross in front of me speaks to me personally, emotionally and intellectually" (2013, 246). This is the case even if in the end Siddiqui cannot accept this concept and maintains God's thoroughgoing transcendence. Still, she is touched by the self-emptying love revealed by the cross at an existential level, leaving herself open to the affective impact of Christian devotion (a witness in itself!) even after her comparative project has ended. Thus, through the comparative process, one comes to feel more rightly about the other religion (at least) and perhaps also (more daringly) about God. This point is particularly salient to the missiologist since, as Malaysian-American theologian Amos Yong has argued, "if the other touches not just one's head but also moves one's body and even the depths of one's soul, then one is not just transformed intellectually but converted personally in some sense" (2014, 174). Not only is the religious Other no longer the rival of our fearful imagination to be confronted and conquered polemically. They have become a fellow wayfarer and even source of our own conversion (in a limited yet real way). Thus, while perhaps not conversion-centric in a traditional sense, CT holds the promise of conversion at an affective level, the result of being "touched" by the other religion and coming to feel more rightly about it and, guided by a cautious yet curious discernment, perhaps also about God. Even so, while affective conversion is located foremost in the comparative theologian's home tradition (as in Siddiqui's case) yet for the evangelical practitioner of CT it cannot but also suggest the possibility of a clearer, more faithfully contextualized expression of evangelistic witness—one that integrates both intellectual and affective dimensions of conversion in a holistic way.

Having described CT as a discipline marked by its confessional, constructive, vulnerable, and affective characteristics, we now turn to explore three ways in which CT can be understood as a new frontier in mission practice.

III. How Does CT Function as a Mission Practice at the Frontiers of Interreligious Engagement?

CT as Bilateral Gospel Contextualization

As we have charted historically, critical theological appropriation is a prerequisite to the successful contextualization of the gospel into new cultural contexts. As we have also hinted at, the capacity to be affectively touched by another religion's beliefs and practices may be another often overlooked but crucial factor in effective, holistic, and contextualized witness, however risky that may feel. The tension between the boldness of the former and the vulnerability of the latter is a constructive tension that is sustained and nurtured—not snapped—by CT. In my reading, this maps well onto what the renowned South African missiologist David Bosch termed the "creative tension" between dialogue and mission among people of other living faiths, a tension which issues forth in a missiology marked by a "bold humility" or "humble boldness" (Bosch 2011 [1991], 494–501).

Within such a boldly humble framework, gospel contextualization is never simply a unilateral process moving from the missioner to the missionized. Such a unilateral approach to contextualization mirrors an understanding of teaching critiqued convincingly by Brazilian educator Paolo Freire in his 1968 classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire criticized a "banking" model of education in which students are receptors of intellectual deposits from their benevolent teachers. Within this framework, "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable, upon those who they consider to know nothing" (1996 [1968], 53). Freire asserted that, despite the best intentions, such a concept of education perpetuates the oppression rather than liberation of the marginalized. More recently, Indigenous (Cherokee) missiologist Randy Woodley argues that what Freire said of teachers can also be said of many Christian missionaries, especially those in the colonial mission toward Indigenous North Americans. Substituting the words *missionary* and *missionized* for Freire's use of *teacher* and *student*, Woodley observes a worrisome overlap in the descriptions: "The [missionary] teaches and the [missionized] are taught… The [missionary] is the subject of the learning process, while the [missionized] are mere objects" (2022, 36). Woodley argues that missionaries, presuming their own superiority, believed they possessed absolute truth in contrast to the Indigenous Other. However, beginning in 2021 in Kamloops, British Columbia, the discovery of unmarked graves at residential schools in Canada and the U.S.—sites where

the 'banking' model of evangelism and education was implemented to its fullest degree—starkly illustrated the devastating consequences of treating evangelism as the mere distribution of a 'truth possessed,' as discussed above.[4]

Despite these lowest of nadirs in mission history, it remains axiomatic that the gospel does not belong to any particular culture (see Acts 15). No culture on its own can fully apprehend the height, width, breadth, and depth of it, nor the love of God which it proclaims. Every culture is Pauline in the sense that it sees through a mirror darkly. Thus, it is not only possible but vital to Christian mission that the practice of contextualization should cut both ways. Even as the missioner attempts to communicate theological truth in a receptor-oriented manner, it is also the case that, by that very process, the gospel gets re-articulated and re-presented from fresh global perspectives that should also be re-received by all parties involved in contextualization. More to the point, the missionized prove in fact to be equal partners and agents in contextualization as it is they who supply the resources for re-articulating the gospel such that it becomes an ever-clearer evangel that leads missioners themselves to a deeper conversion to the lordship of Christ and more faithful participation in the mission of God. In light of the dangers of failing to do otherwise, how might CT facilitate a shift from theory to practice in bilateral contextualization?

CT as Rehabilitating "Syncretism" and Missionaries as "Double Agents"

To address the question, I retroactively read an implicit practice of CT in order to imagine its explicit potential in the years to come. In 2015, the late Lakota theologian Richard Twiss urged readers to "rescue the gospel from the cowboys," that is, from a Euro-American theological discourse that had lost sight of its own parochialism while assuming its universal normativity. While Twiss does not explicitly discuss CT, he does address syncretism—a perennial concern shared by many evangelicals about contextualization practices.[5] Twiss argues that discussions about syncretism should be extricated from the dominant Western discourse that elides the politics of power inherent to determining what is, and what isn't, a 'true' account of Christian faith. He asserts that "mixing is a normative process of positive change and transformation—and not always so clear" (2015, 27). While calling out the real dangers of a "counteractive syncretism" that diminishes, resists, or stops one's journey as a follower of Jesus—American nationalism being his key exampleTwiss' desire to reopen the discussion on

[4] Celia Haig-Brown's ethnographic account featuring interviews with former students of the Kamloops Indian Residential School was revised and expanded in the aftermath of the harrowing discoveries (2022).

[5] For a recent outcome-focused approach to the issue, see Brotherson (2021).

what is and is not syncretism points to the possibility of CT which, by definition, is a critical practice of careful and limited comparison rooted confessionally in one's home tradition.

More recently, Woodley (2022), with whom we have engaged above, goes one step further than Twiss in teasing out the implications of a cautious and discerning theological "mixing" for intercultural and interreligious formation. While serving as an evangelical missionary among Indigenous North Americans, Woodley came to realize that he was given a "converse mission appointment from Native America back to the dominant white Western culture." He was, in his words, a "double agent"—a "bridge" that facilitated a two-way exchange rather than a unilateral transmission. Importantly, Woodley's conviction was clarified through his active practice of gospel contextualization: "By attempting to discover Indigenous context for mission we came to realize that we were the ones who needed the truth and beauty found in Native America as much or more than Native American people needed to hear the truth of the Jesus story." This is a bold statement and, perhaps, assuming a primarily evangelical readership Woodley might permit audiences to read some measure of hyperbole in his words; perhaps not. At the least, Woodley's point is that genuine gospel contextualization results not only in the transformation of the 'receptors' of the gospel but the 'transmitters' as well. As a result, as he comes to affirm, "both conversions were possible"—that is, the missionized and missioners alike are converted to seeing Jesus Christ more accurately, and following him more faithfully (2022, xv). Despite much bewilderment, the missionized offer not only cultural resources but spiritual and theological ones for the global church to deepen its Christian discipleship.

What Twiss and Woodley imply is that the need for one culture (especially the dominant one) to learn from another is not optional but central to the practice of both faithful witness and faithful discipleship. Given the unresolved tension between the gospel's embeddedness in specific contexts—the particularity of the incarnation confirms this—and the liability of all Christian communities to some degree of captivity to cultural conditioning (Rah 2009), the "cultural other" (to use Woodley's term) becomes a necessary source for refining—and at times correcting—one's understanding of, and witness to, Jesus Christ. One of contemporary theology's leading voices, American Anglican Kathryn Tanner, has similarly argued that Christian theology has always taken up and yet recreated the existing cultural, philosophical, and linguistic discourses and thoughts of its environment. Nevertheless, according to Tanner (1997), the transformation was always mutual, renewing not only culture but also the church.

Borrowing from other cultures therefore does not entail Christian appropriation alone:

> Borrowed materials should not, then, always be subordinated to Christian claims; they should be permitted, instead, to shake them up where necessary. If Christianity's having the upper hand over non-Christian materials is made into a rule, this only encourages the Word's enslavement to the human words of Christians. (1997, 150)

To resist the cultural enslavement of the divine Word to human words requires the humility and vulnerability on the part of Christians to be corrected, when necessary, by *other* cultures. Tanner thus offers further theological warrant for identifying mission practitioners as "double agents" with a dual sense of mission that is both outward to the religious Other and inward to the church which, as the Reformed tradition puts well, should remain always reforming.

CT as Presaging the Redemption of Tongues, Cultures…and Religions?

What the foregoing two subsections imply is the possibility that, despite much bewilderment and surprise, the redemption of peoples and their cultures includes the religious depth dimensions of the latter. Yet how can one entertain even the possibility of this as an evangelical missiologist? While the scope of the question far exceeds that of this paper, some initial reflections are warranted. We begin by turning to the great missionary statesman, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who observed the entangled nature of religion with culture:

> In most human cultures religion is not a separate activity set apart from the rest of life…The sharp line which modern Western culture has drawn between religious affairs and secular affairs is itself one of the most significant peculiarities of our culture and would be incomprehensible to the vast majority of people who have not been brought into contact with this culture. (Newbigin 1989, 131)

Newbigin's observation is echoed in Woodley's experience of Indigenous culture: "Spirituality is inseparable from Indigenous life and thought. It is woven into the very fabric of being Indigenous" (2022, 98). Defining an area called 'religion' is typical of a Western approach to life inasmuch as it requires compartmentalizing one aspect of life from others. However, to engage Indigenous North American culture—among many other cultures of the world—is to simultaneously engage the spiritual practices and beliefs that form its warp and woof.

Pentecostal-evangelical scholar Amos Yong agrees with Newbigin but amplifies further the significance of the culture-religion conjunction by situating it within the biblical context of the Pentecost narrative, where the outpouring of the Holy Spirit enables each one to give witness to "the wondrous works of God" in and through the diversity of languages (Acts 2:11). Reminiscent of Newbigin, Yong comments: "Because the phenomenon of language and of culture cannot be arbitrarily separated from that of religion, the principle of linguistic and cultural diversity necessarily includes that of religious diversity" (2005, 177). Hence, according to Yong, the biblical Day of Pentecost can be understood to redeem not only human languages and cultures, but also human religiosity. Yet, like Woodley's earlier statement, Yong's suggestion seems bold for an evangelical scholar—but he is not finished. Yong interprets the outpouring of the Spirit as, in fact, determinative of what theological method and interreligious engagement should look like in the third millennium of Christianity, since "the Spirit who gives the capacity to speak in a foreign language also can enable, by extension, participation in a foreign culture and even a foreign religion, so that one can experience those realities to some degree 'from within.'" In other words, Pentecost makes possible a dialogical method of both witness *to* cultural-linguistic-religious Others and theological reflection spurred on by resources *from* the Other. Yong then applies this pneumatically sourced dialogical method to a missiology that is comparative through and through. "May I suggest that the same Spirit whose outpouring on the Day of Pentecost enabled the speaking in foreign tongues also today enables genuine cross-over into and return from other faiths so as to engage in their claims to truth?" (2005, 180). Yong's method of cross-over and return anticipates Clooney's definition of CT, yet it is anchored within a distinctly pneumatic power source and *raison d' être*. For Yong, in other words, to practice CT is to participate in the *missio Spiritus*. It is thus no surprise that Yong (2012) contributes one of the earliest pentecostal-evangelical forays into the field of CT, inquiring into what ways the Spirit might blow through the 'middle way' of Buddhist tradition.

It is also worth emphasizing that, since it is the "Spirit poured out on all flesh" who enables such cross-over into other cultures/religions, the practice of CT—demanding as it is as an academic discipline[6]—reaches beyond the academy (and does not always begin there!) to include the realm of mission practice at the ground level. After all, CT at its best emerges out of interreligious relationships where the practitioner-as-guest is welcomed by another religio-culture to a long-term journey of mutual learning and

[6] Even Clooney admits that its practice can be seen as elitist – by and for the few (2010, 65).

witness. This is the fertile soil in which the gospel gets continually recontextualized, such that its meaning and power are never understood to have been exhausted by any single culture's articulation of it. To summarize this section, by fostering a two-way gospel contextualization, CT results not only in non-Christians perceiving more accurately the work of Jesus Christ among them but also in Christians realizing and rejoicing in the very same.

IV. What Does CT Achieve? An Example from Christian-Muslim Debates on the 'Word of God'

What does this all look like in practice? In what follows, I offer a brief exercise in CT by considering how Christian engagement with the theological concept of divine revelation may be intensified[7] in conversation with Islam, resulting in a more holistic Christian witness among Muslims.

Joshua Ralston, a specialist in Christian-Musim CT, observes that "one of the most productive turns" in recent Christian-Muslim theological dialogue occurs at the points of resonance in Christian and Muslim thought about divine transcendence and divine revelation (2022, 127). Nearly sixty years ago, Iranian Islamics scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr recognized that it was a categorical mistake to compare the Qur'an with the Bible: "The word of God in Islam is the Qurʾân; in Christianity it is Christ" (Nasr 1979 [1966], 43). About a decade later, American historian of philosophy Harry Austryn Wolfson coined the term "inlibration," a notion that divine revelation in Islam occurs in book form, or as Wolfson tersely describes it, "embookment" (Wolfson 1976, 246). Under this rubric, the Qur'an functions as a theological counterpart to the Christian understanding of Jesus as God's Word made flesh in the incarnation. Indeed, Wolfson asserts that classical Muslim debates on the relationship of the uncreated Word of God to the revealed Qur'an are analogous to early Christian debates about the relationship of the uncreated Logos of God to that of the birthed Jesus (1976, 244-48).

This demonstrates that getting the comparative categories straight is an imperative first task of CT, so that one isn't left trying to compare apples with oranges.[8] Once it becomes clear that the category of "divine revelation" and "word of God" map most

[7] Catherine Cornille lists various types of learning in CT, including *intensification* of religious meaning or experience; *rectification* of one's understanding; *recovery* of figures, teachings, or practices that were neglected or marginalized; *reinterpretation* of one tradition through the categories of another; and *appropriation* by one tradition of new elements derived from another (2019, 115–47).

[8] For the methodological importance of identifying suitable comparative categories, see Neville (2013).

accurately to Jesus Christ in Christianity and Qur'an in Islam, then it becomes possible to proceed with theological cross-over and comparison equipped with a common language to express more accurately points of similarity and difference. With this category in mind, Daniel Madigan, SJ, argues that on the one hand, words in a book may be less prone to misinterpretation than "flesh" when the message consists of instruction and direction—the more straightforward the language, the better. "If, however," writes Madigan, "the message is of love, forgiveness and reconciliation, then we can all recognize, whether we are Muslims or Christians, that body-language—our gestures, our actions, our vulnerability—speak much more clearly than the finest of words" (2007, 93). Though it may not have been his explicit aim, Madigan presents a good example of CT at work in Christian contextualization of the evangel in Muslim contexts. Through a comparison of Muslim and Christian understandings of divine revelation, Christians may assert with clearer precision (and perhaps more effective persuasion?) that what distinguishes the Christ event theologically from the qur'anic revelation is that there are some attributes of God that may be more effectively revealed to humanity through body-language (i.e., incarnation) than through either speech or the written word (i.e., inlibration).

However, Wolfson's concept of inlibration appears to me an insufficient theological description of a Muslim's experience with the Qur'an, especially as the latter is engaged in the day-to-day spiritual formation of Muslims through ritual prayer (*ṣalāh*). Jane McAuliffe, Qur'an scholar and president emerita of the American Academy of Religion, summarizes a Muslim's relationship with the Qur'an as encompassing three aspects: the carnal, conceptual, and communal. While all aspects are equally important, it is the carnal component that interests me most at this juncture. McAuliffe explains that for most Muslims, the Qur'an is "heard, viewed, touched, and sometimes ingested, long before it is ever read," and it is generally "'embodied' within Muslim life and material culture" (McAuliffe 2005, 621). The carnal dimension should therefore not be overlooked, as is sometimes the tendency in Western academic spaces that privilege a predominantly conceptual approach to learning centered around texts. It thus also stands to reason that Christian witness to the Word incarnate must also somehow 'speak' not only to the *conceptual* (verbal and textual) but also *carnal* dimensions of Muslim religiosity if it is to be effectively communicated.

If one examines more closely the practice of Muslim ritual prayer, one finds that the use of the Qur'an engages not a disembodied mind but the eye (through calligraphy),

the hands (through touching the Qur'an and the ritual ablutions required to do so), and especially the ear and tongue of the worshiper (through Qur'an audition and cantillation). Moreover, Muslims prostrate themselves in response to Qur'an recitation, repeatedly placing their feet, knees, palms, nose, and forehead against the ground. Thus, the 'carnality' of Muslim engagement with the Qur'an problematizes the notion of inlibration, showing that it is reductionistic to conceive of the Qur'an as a mere book to be read and studied. Rather, in the carnal aspect of its relationship to the worshiper, I argue that the Qur'an appears to take on an 'incarnational' function as well – albeit, of course, differently understood than in Christian theological terms. According to Vietnamese-American Muslim theologian Martin Nguyen, "The Qur'an…is not just a textual phenomenon but embodies more comprehensively a speech act possessing both existential force, such that it is in the world, and an experiential structure, such that it transforms those who engage with it" (Nguyen 2018, 105). Nguyen's point is particularly suggestive because, by referring to the Qur'an as a speech act possessing its own agential force, he reminds readers of the living quality of divine self-revelation, a quality that, according to Muslims, is articulated anew with each qur'anic recitation. Moreover, since the agent in this case is believed to be God, the encounter between human reciter and the God who reveals/speaks is particularly intimate and intense, collapsing as it were the chasm between Creator (Revealer) and creation (reciter) while still maintaining the ontological distinction that is so central to Islamic belief (*tawḥīd*). Thus, while Wolfson's notion of inlibration may continue to hold conceptual cachet if the Qur'an is studied in isolation from its ritual use, it appears to me too passive a term to describe accurately the lived engagement of Muslims with the visual, tactile, auditory, recitative Qur'an – in short, the carnal Qur'an. As a book, the Qur'an is certainly to be studied and analyzed; as an oral tradition, it comes alive to Muslims as an ever-living divine speech act articulated through the bodies of its hearers and reciters.

Emphasizing the embodied dimensions of Qur'an engagement is to simultaneously critique practices of theological dialogue that privilege textual comparison, such as Scriptural Reasoning (Avcı 2018), as well as practices of CT that isolate textual comparison from religious ritual and material practices (Moyaert 2018). Yet from a missiological perspective, does not this brief comparative theological reflection on the carnal Qur'an also suggest the limitations of concepts-driven, text-centered approaches to Christian evangelism among Muslims? Is there not a more en*fleshed* way to proclaim the divine Word-made-flesh? If this is the case, then, thinking

constructively, perhaps there is something to be learned *by Christians* about the way divine revelation is accessed, sensed, and materially engaged through Muslim practices of worship. Methodologically, such comparative theological proposals bracket any *a priori* judgment that incarnation is theologically superior to inlibration in order that the comparison might remain vulnerable and constructive. For example, while Madigan is correct to view Christian incarnation as God's "body language," the point is that it is still worth asking in what ways *ṣalāh* prayer facilitates not only reaching out to but perhaps also receiving back from God through the human body's participation in prayerful engagement with the carnal Qur'an. The results of comparison may lead to further refining the theological concepts used by Christians and Muslims to describe divine revelation. Missiologically speaking, such cross-over and return may also enable Christians to witness more clearly—more carnally?—to the ways in which divine incarnation reaches not only the intellect but also the bodies, emotions, and desires of worshipers.

Conclusion: Fellow Pilgrims on the Emmaus Road

The renowned evangelical Islamicist and missiologist J. Dudley Woodberry edited a volume in the late 1980's entitled *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road*. In it, he asserts: "Any meaningful dialogue with Muslims needs to start by walking with them, listening to them, and asking them questions" (1989, xiii). The story in Luke 24 of travel companions wrestling with difficult questions about a Jesus who graciously draws near yet remains indistinct offers a compelling metaphor for CT. I have argued in this paper that the vulnerable practice of CT accords well with a 'truth pursued' approach to mission in dialogue with fellow pilgrims from other faiths—faiths that, according to the data, are not going anywhere soon. To practice CT means not walking *behind* our travel companions on the Emmaus Road—a position that purports to see events with great perspicacity—but *alongside* them as fellow pilgrim-disciples along the way.

Pilgrims, recalling what Rah said in our opening, are those in continual pursuit of truth, not those who believe they have come to possess it in an absolute manner. In the Gospels, we see 'truth pursued' not only along the Emmaus Road but in Jesus' initial invitation to the fishermen to come follow him and learn to fish for people (Matthew 4:19). But the pursuit of Truth incarnate is never ended this side of the eschaton, even for the Twelve who followed after Jesus so closely. Much later in the gospel narratives, right before Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, we read the following in

Mark 10:32: "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid." While we boldly assert that Christians are called to participate in the mission of God, the practice of CT reminds us that we also humbly participate in the mission of pilgrims *toward* God who, though he has tabernacled among us, sometimes still walks a few steps ahead (cf. Sebastian 2012). There may be much bewilderment and surprise along the way, and indeed perhaps a genuine fear of the unknown. But the astonished disciples, trailing behind a Jesus whom I imagine appears somewhat unrecognizable in his resolution to go where most did not elect, reminds us that there exists a reverent fear apropos to the pursuit of Jesus. The confessionally rooted yet vulnerable task of comparative theology, which I have argued stands at the frontier of evangelical mission practice today, is likely to evoke a similar apprehension in its practitioners as they engage, with humble boldness witnessing to a truth pursued, those who are different from themselves. The question is: can Christian mission and discipleship do without this reverent fear? For from it may emerge the surprise—the awe of hearing God's works declared anew, not only in unfamiliar languages but also in new accents and nuances within the tongues we thought we knew so well.

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Frontier Mission in a Time of Geopolitical Conflicts[1]

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In the past several years, friends from western countries have asked with genuine concerns about my family and the situation in Taiwan due to recently increasing tensions between Taiwan and China. *The Economist* did not help the situation when they featured Taiwan in their cover story in 2021, entitled, "The Most Dangerous Place on Earth."[2] Born and raised in Taiwan, I am not unfamiliar with threats and rumors of war. Air raid drills were routine when I was in elementary school. I still remember the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, during the first presidential election in Taiwan, bringing tensions with China to a historical high. Rumors of war were at every corner, the outcome being a large wave of emigration from Taiwan. A similar scenario repeated in 2023 before the 2024 presidential election in Taiwan but on a smaller scale. Although China claimed the election was a choice between "war and peace," the candidate of the pro-sovereignty party won the presidency in 2024. Meanwhile, most of my friends and family in Taiwan live their daily lives as usual. After Russia invaded Ukraine, some Taiwanese started to sense there might be a possibility that China would invade Taiwan.

Last year before the election, my husband and I had a short visit to Taiwan. We connected with a Taiwanese American pastor, who came to Taiwan with his family about two decades ago and planted a vibrant church. He asked about our thoughts on the increasing China-Taiwan tension. We shared our views, then he told us he believed that China would invade Taiwan. It was just a matter of time. He continued, saying that if war broke out between China and Taiwan, he would choose to stay, though it would require leaving his sending organization since they would require all their members to leave. Most organizations have a policy of not forcing cross-cultural workers to stay but rather pulling them out in times of crisis. The pastor told us he would choose to stay because, if he left, it would be very difficult to enter Taiwan again, and he believed there would be a lot of kingdom work after the invasion.

I was impressed by this missionary-pastor's courage and commitment to God's calling. Our conversation stimulated my thinking toward the challenges that the frontier workers face in the midst of geological conflicts, as well as two missiological questions: Should workers stay or leave in a conflict zone? Is it worth it to send workers to volatile locations in a time of instability and conflict?

Geopolitics and Frontier Mission

Missionaries who serve overseas often bear the brunt of the geopolitical tensions. The most direct effect is with visa options which provide country access. The visa limitations also affect those whom mission agencies could recruit and send, i.e. the "mission force." Furthermore, if the passport country of the missionaries is on the opposing side in a conflict, is involved in hostilities, or even was at war with the host country, the missionaries may struggle with conflicting identities or loyalties. In the long term it may even impact their mental health.

Access and Mission Force

The political relationship between the passport country and host country of the field worker influences visa options. For example, U.S. citizens used to be able to enter Turkey with visa on arrival, but when the two countries had political tensions, Turkey started to require U.S. citizens to obtain an e-visa from 2013-2024. A similar situation occurred between Canada and Egypt: between 2023 and 2024 Egypt had required Canadian travelers to apply for an e-visa before arrival. On the other hand, if two countries have close ties or are allies politically or/and economically, it is much easier for people of these countries to travel between these two countries. I will take China as an example here.

Since the 1990s, China has intentionally invested in and sought allies with the majority world including Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, collaborating in economic and political activities. Over the past ten years since China started the "One Belt, One Road Initiative" (BRI) in 2013,[3] http://english.www.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/3 there has been significant growing Chinese population in Africa and the Middle East. According to the 2022 data of Statistical Yearbook of the Overseas Community Affairs Council of Taiwan, compared with the data in 2010, the overseas Chinese [4] population in Africa has grown from 0.24 to 1.18 million—nearly 500% in just twelve years (Overseas Community

[3] c.f. Chinese State website,

[4] 海外華人 (*Haiwai Huaren*), which includes ethnic Chinese and their descendants who emigrated from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Affairs Council, 2010 and 2022). The massive investment and infrastructure projects that China brought into Africa have opened doors for Chinese laborers, professionals, and businessmen (Hicks, 2019). Meanwhile, there are more than half a million Chinese in the Middle East, most of whom live in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the U.A.E. (China News, 2017). BRI has opened the door for Christian Chinese contractors and businessmen to enter Africa and other BRI partnering countries in the Middle East, becoming a potential mission force through business as mission (BAM). Some countries are hostile to the Western countries due to geopolitical conflicts, and it is nearly not possible to send American citizens to live and serve there, but some Chinese missionaries have entered such countries and established ministries there.

Moreover, this open door is not only one-way. It is also easier for Africans to travel to China. In 2015 during the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, Chinese President Xi promised to provide scholarships and visas for African students to study in China (Xinhua, 2018). Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, Western mission agencies have tried to find ways to reenter China, but their options may be limited due to geopolitical tensions. On the other hand, some sending agencies have started to consider sending African missionaries to China since they have more visa options. Now the concept of "Creative-Access" should not only consider platforms, but also the nationalities of mission force! I once told a leader in my organization, "There are no closed countries. It depends on which nationalities you recruit and send."

Conflicting Identities/ Loyalties

Many missionaries seek to love and identify with the people they serve for the sake of the gospel. "And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law" (1 Cor. 9:20). My mentor Dr. Robert Priest put it this way, "When you are cheering for the national team of the country that you are serving in international sports events, you are doing it right!" It is beautiful when kingdom workers learn to love, bond, and identify with a nation that they do not have any blood relation with. But when the passport country and host country of the worker are in conflict, the worker may also feel torn.

For example, kingdom workers who work in Muslim contexts usually feel the impact of the Israel-Palestine conflicts. In 2018, when the U.S. moved its embassy to Jerusalem, there were many protests in Muslim countries around the world. At that time, we were serving in a country which hosted more than four million Palestinians. On the day the

news was released, the international schools asked the American parents not to send their children to school because they could not predict what would happen on the streets. An Arabic language school director, who was an American worker, sent email to foreign students, advising them when they attended the next day, to say, "I am sorry for the government's decision" in the beginning of the class so that the class might go well.

My husband and I recently served in a country that was invaded by the U.S. more than 20 years ago, and my husband is an American citizen. The local ministry partners that we trusted advised him not to tell the local people that he was American. Since my husband is half Hispanic, he usually told the local people he met on the streets that he was originally from a certain Hispanic country. At times he even struggled with conflicting feelings about his American identity. The more we loved the country we served, the more we felt conflicted about what the U.S. had done in this country.

In these kinds of conflictual situations, it is much easier to simply choose sides. Months ago, when we visited my husband's seminary professor and his wife, we talked about the Israel-Gaza war. The professor's wife said, "It is much easier to choose sides, to justify one side and dehumanize the other, so we won't feel guilty, heartbroken or struggle." As followers of Jesus, we learn to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15) instead of choosing sides. We witness the love of Jesus by showing compassion, empathy and recognizing their sufferings, instead of downplaying or justifying the perpetrators' actions.

To Leave or to Stay?

Years ago, after my husband and I found an apartment and signed a contract in the country (that was invaded by the U.S.) where we served, we waited outside the country for our first residency visa. After the visa came, we were eager to return and get settled into our new home. On the day we were scheduled to fly back, the US embassy in that city announced the withdrawal of their staff due to high geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and Iran and the possibility of military conflict. We suddenly had a tough decision: should we fly or not? After prayers and consulting with the local partnering pastor, we decided to return as planned. We are grateful that the Lord opened the door for us to stay and served for four more years after that incident. However, our host country was a constant proxy of regional hostile entities, with the U.S. embassy in the city we lived in being a continual target of rocket attacks during the years we lived there. Eventually, almost all workers in our city had to leave due to a security crisis.

A Time to Stay

When making decision on whether to leave or stay, a rule of thumb for most field workers is to listen to the local people's advice. If our presence will endanger them, we should leave. But many times the situation is not so clear-cut. From an organization's standpoint, it is always hard to make the call—to allow the workers to stay or to pull them out in times of crisis and conflicts. If the organization pulls the workers out too early, they may lose opportunities for ministry, and the workers may feel they are not obeying their calling from the Lord. On the other hand, if the organization lets the workers stay (or enter), and bad things happen to the workers, the organization could possibly be blamed. My husband and I have heard stories of both scenarios, and in past years we also faced situations in which we had to make such decisions. For example, one senior leader of our organization told us that two years before civil war broke out in Yemen, some organizations pulled out their workers due to the assassination of a field worker. However, most workers who were evacuated in what was supposed to be a temporary relocation to neighboring countries did not adjust well in the new countries and lost their sense of purpose and meaning in their ministries. Many of them later left the field in discouragement. In this case, this senior leader believed their organizations pulled their workers out too early.

In 2023, one year after the Ukraine-Russia war, the Gospel Coalition interviewed Ukrainian Christians and field workers, and they reported that many churches are growing, and Ukrainian refugees have revived churches in neighboring countries (Zylstra, 2023). An American worker in Ukraine told the TGC journalist, "We know where he called us to, so that's definitely where we want to be. We wouldn't want to be anywhere else right now" (Zylstra, 2023).

A Korean family, fellow workers, and friends of ours, shared with us their experiences of making decisions on the edge of war. When ISIS emerged, invading, and taking over a major city not far from them in 2014, they had to make the decision to stay or leave. At that time their city had already been flooded with refugees from nearby cities, and the ISIS was just miles away. Their local friends did not believe they would stay, though this worker family had previously told their friends that they would stay with them even if the war broke out in their city. By God's grace, ISIS could not take their city, and the military was able to defend their land. But since they chose to stay, their ministry has grown tremendously. Before the war, there was no known believer in

their field, but since the war, they have planted local churches and witnessed a small movement among the people group that they serve.

Most stories so far may seem to support the option of letting missionaries stay in times of conflict. Yet I believe sometimes it takes as much faith to leave as to stay, if not more. Perhaps a little humility, too. There are definitely times that missionaries should leave, which can also be God's will. As it is written in Ecclesiastes 3:1, "there is a time for everything."

A Time to Leave

In 1949, the Communist party took over mainland China after years of civil war against the National Party. At that time, the Chinese church already had influential leaders like Ming-Dao Wang, John Sung, and Watchman Nee. Between 1951-53, the Communist regime expelled all foreign missionaries and started to persecute the local churches, putting house church leaders in jail. It might have felt like the end of Chinese Christianity at that time. Probably no one would expect that in the early 1990s, after many house church leaders were released from prison, they would gradually start the house-church movement in mainland China.[5] We cannot overlook the way many Korean missionaries and Chinese Christians in diaspora from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and North America contributed to the development of the urban house churches later; but overall, it was a sovereign work of God.

A similar story took place in the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The monarchy was overthrown, and a Shia Islamic theocracy was established. The regime began enforcing Islamic law, and evangelism to Persian Muslims was forbidden. Though historical Christian minority groups could still practice their faith, Muslims who converted to Christian faith could face the death penalty. Since then, foreign missionaries were not allowed to enter, except for some Iranian believers in diaspora and recent workers from non-western countries. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, through dreams and visions, media ministry (e.g. SAT7 and social media), and diaspora ministry, now many reports identify Iranian house churches as the fastest growing church in the world.[6]

Revelation 3:8 is a frequently quoted scripture: "See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." Undoubtedly, this verse is very encouraging in any

[5] For more a brief history of house church in China, please see see https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/faith-going-public/ .

[6] For more stories and testimonies in Iran, please see https://www.elam.com

kind of ministry, especially in missional contexts. But the previous verse indicates that "what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open" (a message previously communicated in Isaiah 22:22). It seems that our Lord not only opens doors, but also shuts them. However, we sometimes tend to emphasize the open-door part and neglect the shutting-door part. When God clearly shuts the door, and it is time to leave, we should leave.

In both China and Iran, God built His church in the midst of severe persecutions and trials for the local believers. For He said, "*I will build my church*, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18). God does not need us for His kingdom work. It is humbling to be reminded that we might not be that important. There may be a time God chooses to use us, but also a time he does not. The popular saying "Let go, let God" may apply well to missionaries in the situation when they are forced to leave. A Singaporean preacher from my home church said it well: "There is a difference between boldness inspired by the Holy Spirit and pride from our flesh when facing oppositions." In such times, it may take faith and humility to leave our work behind. Our response in such situations should be, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). The question of staying vs. leaving, therefore, is challenging and significant question for those called to serve in times of turmoil. Another question, however, wrestles with if it is worth it to send (or keep) workers in places of high stakes and conflict.

Is it Worth it?

Before we ask the question "is it worth it or not?", we may need to answer a related question first: "What do we expect in our life as followers of Jesus?" Do we expect hardship or a comfortable life? An American mini-series "Band of Brothers," which I watched twice, tells stories of the Allies from the Normandy landings during the World War II. I particularly like a quote from one episode when the soldiers report to their leader, "We are paratroopers, Lieutenant. *We are supposed to be surrounded*." It was this kind of right expectation that made these soldiers fearless, loyal, and strong. As messengers of God engaging the world on the frontlines, we also are "supposed to be surrounded" by enemies—not enemies of "flesh and blood," but spiritual adversaries (Eph 6:12). What prepares us for a right expectation is a sound theology of suffering.

Before the first time we took a survey trip to our recent field years ago, we visited an elderly couple of another organization who had served in the Middle East for decades and visited that country more than a decade ago when it was still turbulent and dangerous. After a warm greeting, they listened to our stories and experiences. I mentioned my previous experience of serving in a house church in China. I had to evacuate after a few months due to a police raid. Then this veteran missionary couple told us in earnest that a sound theology of suffering was necessary to enter a war-torn country like our field, and my experience of suffering persecution would help. I was impressed by their wise words.

If we have false belief and unrealistic expectation such as "bad things will not happen to good Christians" or "as long as we are doing God's work, he will protect us from all evil," then when afflictions strike us, our faith in God might be shaken. We might even lose our faith. A comprehensive study of the theme of sufferings and persecutions in the Bible will be helpful and crucial.

Challenged by the Lord

Years ago, one of our leaders prayed for us on the night when we departed for our field: "Lord, we know that it will not be easy to win souls for You on this field.... We will go through many hardships and pains.... But it's all worth it because Jesus is worthy." I was deeply touched by the prayer of our leader, though I had no idea what was waiting in front of me at that moment. Little did I know what he prayed would come true in the following years.

It was nearly one year after arriving in the country. We bought every piece of furniture, including the kitchen cupboards and sink, and just started to feel at home. Then a geopolitical crisis happened. A high-profile military Iranian commander along with a few local officers, were assassinated in our city by the US government. We were grateful that we were outside of the country attending a conference at that moment, but suddenly people started to talk about the possibility of World War III. We were told by some we should consider not returning to our host country indefinitely. It was a stressful time for everyone who was in the region, but I was also worried and anxious about all our belongings in our home. I did not want to lose the furniture we just bought, as well as my clothes and food, etc. I could not sleep at night.

One night, I was reminded by the Lord of a story that I heard years ago when my husband and I were serving in a different country. It was a testimony of a Middle Eastern Christian-background believer. He and his family fled their hometown when ISIS invaded, and then they temporally settled in a neighboring country. In that country, through the local Arab Christian church, he became a follower of Jesus. In his testimony he said, "When I was in my hometown, I had everything—house, car, and job. But I did not know Jesus. Now I left my home and lost everything, but I know Jesus. If this is what takes to know Jesus, *it is worth it*!" I felt the Lord was challenging me that night: "If this Middle Eastern brother believes it is worth it to lose everything to know Jesus, don't you think it is worth it to lose everything to serve his country and help people there know Jesus?"

Thankfully by God's grace, World War III did not happen that year. We were able to return our home after one month. But since then, whenever we leave the country, we bring important documents and items with us as if we might not be able to return. Yet I have peace in my heart even if one day we lose most of our belongings in our beloved host country.

The Biggest Loss

From an organization's viewpoint, if an organization allows a missionary to stay or to enter a high-risk area and they lose their lives as a result of being there, the organization might assume they have made a mistake. But it might or might not have been a mistake. Either way, this kind of thinking assumes that the worst thing that could ever happen to a missionary is death. But the Lord alone has the authority of our lives and ministries. He can use the life of a missionary as well of the death of a missionary. As our Lord says,

> "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (John 12:24–25)

I am not trying to trivialize or water down the pain, trauma, grief of the loss of life. My husband and I personally experienced all of these when losing a fellow worker and dear friend on our field recently. The loss is real.

But after being involved in kingdom work for more than a decade, I believe the worst thing could happen to a missionary is not the loss of their lives, but loss of their faith. After our brother in Christ John Chau was martyred in late 2018, the news of his death went viral with floods of negative public criticism including those from Christian circle. Recently National Geographic even released a documentary "The Mission" based on his story. I am saddened to see in this documentary how his parents blamed the sending agency and the entire Evangelical mission movement, which focuses on Unreached People Groups (UPG), for their son's death. I could not imagine the amount of pressure that John's agency has endured. I met John's parents when attending the same Chinese American church many years ago, and I wrote an article to respond the criticism against his mission right after (Wu 2020, 4-6). Then, about half a year after John Chau's passing, another Christian-related front-page story bothered me even more. The famous Christian writer Joshua Harris announced he was not a Christian anymore. I could not help but comparing these two cases: One person who never received fame, wealth, or any other "benefits" through his faith but lost his life for his faith; while another gained fame, wealth as well as other benefits through his faith but ended up losing his faith in this life. Yet the former was considered foolish. Similarly, the documentary "The Mission" interviewed an ex-missionary and ex-Christian, who lost his faith after many years on the mission field and gave him platform to criticize John who lost his life for faith and attack the Evangelical mission movement as if he is "the wise one." This blunt contrast might sound like a modern-day parable. The famous quote of Jim Elliot sums it up best: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Not in Vain

In his book, *The Messenger, the Message and the Community*, Roland Muller finds that the one common quality of fruitful missionaries is that they all have a "cross experience." This is an experience of personal suffering that brings "death to self" and forces these missionaries to "cast themselves onto God." Our sufferings are not meaningless or a waste. In the letter of James, he encourages us "consider it pure joy, my brothers, and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (1:2-3). This gives us a purpose and meaning as we go through trials. He continues in 1:12, "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive *the crown of life* that the Lord has promised to those who love him." In the Book of Revelation, John also mentions *the*

crown of life in the context of perseverance of sufferings, and these are the only two occurrences in the New Testament on crown of life:

> "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you *the crown of life*." (2:9–10, ESV, emphasis added)

Both James and John use the Greek word *stephanon*, which means crown, in the phrase "the crown of life" (*ton stephanon tes zoes*). It may be noteworthy that the name of the first martyr in the New Testament is Stephen, which also comes from this same Greek word "crown." Did John and James have Stephen in their minds when they wrote these verses? I do not know. But what I do know is that Stephen was indeed *faithful unto death* and surely, he received *the crown of life*.

When almost all foreign workers had to leave our field due to the aftermath of our friend's martyrdom, I was heartbroken and devastated. But the Lord reminded me what He did in China and Iran. "Your planting and reaping are never the same. But your labor is not in vain," as goes the lyrics of the worship song *Your Labor is Not in Vain*. Our friend's sacrifice will not be in vain. After all, it is indeed worth it, because our Lord is worthy.

Concluding Words

We live in a time of conflicts and turmoil. The global pandemic seems to be finally over, but the increasing geopolitical conflicts such as the Taiwan-China tension, the Ukraine-Russia war, and the war between Israel and Gaza along with the related conflicts in the Middle East cast an even greater shadow over the world. Our Lord is the lord of history, and everything happens according to his plan. The recent geopolitical developments have impacted the movement and dynamics of the global mission. It has shut doors for mission for some while opening doors for others. "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens…A time to plant and a time to uproot…a time for war and a time for peace" (Ecclesiastes 3:1,2, 8). Before we make the decision on whether to pull out workers in a conflict zone or ask the question whether we should go there or not, it is essential to have a sound theology of suffering, especially in times

like this. In this way, we learn to listen to the Lord's voice, discern when He shuts or opens the door, and trust in His timing and sovereignty.

The time is evil, and the Lord is near. "*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain*" (1 Cor. 15:58).

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Equipping for Frontiers in Missions: Trauma and the Resurrection

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Though death and suffering are universal, some vocations increase the likelihood of repeatedly encountering such events; missions is one such vocation (Bagley 2003, 105). These circumstances violate God's design for his image bearers and often severely impact a person's perceptions of self and the world he inhabits. Therefore, these experiences can lead to a variety of disruptions designated as trauma. In spite of risk factors common to many fields, formal missions training in the church and academic institutions sometimes overlooks preparation for suffering or awareness of trauma (Rance 2021, 142–44). Sending and supporting workers, especially in unreached contexts, should include preparation for heightened risk (Irvine, Armentrout, and Miner 2006, 332–34), and theology is essential as part of this process. In particular, the twenty-first century church should consider a key theological emphasis of the first-century church: throughout the book of Acts, Jesus's resurrection is the most frequently cited event, motivating believers to follow Jesus and embrace risk on his mission.[1] Furthermore, both the narratives of Paul's ministry in Acts and his epistles highlight the centrality of resurrection theology in Christian response to suffering.

My thesis is that preparation for missional service should include a robust understanding of the doctrine of bodily resurrection with application to suffering and trauma. I will develop this argument in two movements. First, I will describe trauma's prevalence in missions and the role of plausibility structures in trauma. Second, I will examine the apostle Paul's plausibility structure for bodily suffering and resurrection in the context of missional endeavors. I will conclude with several suggestions for application in pre-field training.

[1] Jesus's resurrection is explicitly cited on thirteen different occasions (Acts 1:3; 22 2:24–32; 3:15, 26; 4:10; 4:33; 5:30; 11:40–41; 13:30–37; 17:3; 17:31–32; 23:6; 26:23; cf. 24:15, 21 and 25:19). Jesus's death is cited nine times, all concurrent with the resurrection (Acts 1:3; 2:23; 3:13–15, 18; 4:10; 5:30; 11:39; 13:28–29; 17:3; 26:23).

Missions and Trauma

To begin, I will describe what I mean by the term *trauma*, discuss its prevalence in missions, and summarize the idea of plausibility structures relevant to trauma. Based on the doctrine of man's creation in God's image as a dualistic whole[2] and considerations from trauma literature (Strickland 2022, 26; Van der Kolk 2015, 21; Langberg 2015, 78–79, 118; Walsh 1996, 245–47; Figley 1985, xviii), I understand trauma to entail (1) an overwhelming event that violates aspects of a person's image-bearing identity; (2) harm to body and soul as interdependent dimensions of an embodied person; and (3) ongoing, disruptive responses in a person's perception of self, other image bearers, God, and circumstances.[3]

Since trauma occurs everywhere that image bearers face the fall's effects, why consider missions contexts in particular? Many reasons could be discussed. I will suggest three: cross-cultural vulnerability, hazardous locations, and spiritual warfare. First, broadly speaking, missionaries live with significant stress factors. For instance, cross-cultural adaptation significantly raises demands on a person's capacities for basic life functions. The multi-layered dimensions of living life while learning language and culture place missionaries in a vulnerable position, which can be strange and disorienting for otherwise competent adults. Consequently, encountering suffering in these contexts can readily multiply stress to a level that overwhelms.

Second, and more specific to many unreached fields, vulnerable missionaries often live in vulnerable contexts. Unreached people often live in unsafe places. Developing nations generally suffer from a lack of infrastructure, medical resources, and educational opportunities; all these factors increase the prevalence of crime and intensify the effects of natural disasters. Also, many missionaries live under the pressure of hostile civil authorities and the associated concern for local friends' safety.

[2] This view rests on the *imago Dei* as the center of biblical anthropology, defining the whole person's identity (humans are God's image) and function (humans image God): body and soul, capacities and function, reason and relationships (Hoekema 1986, 66–78; Bavinck 2003, 555–60).

[3] These perceptions manifest in diverse ways. By specifying perception, I do not preclude embodied dimensions of trauma; rather, I see perception as foundational to all trauma responses. The perception of ongoing danger drives many manifestations of trauma, including various health issues, hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, and more. The perception that a past event is still impending can lead to flashbacks, nightmares, and dissociation. The perception that people cannot be trusted manifests in disorganized attachment, withdrawal, grief, anger, and more. We cannot discern perception apart from its manifestation in our thoughts, words, actions, emotions, and physical states. We also cannot understand the reasons for a person's responses apart from their perception of themselves, other people, God, and their circumstances. The complexity of our constitution as embodied souls demands patient, careful consideration of the whole person.

Third, spiritual warfare is intense where demonic religious systems have been unchallenged, sometimes for centuries. Satan seeks to destroy and devour through deception and murder (John 8:44; 1 Pet 5:8); he unleashes hatred for God upon God's image bearers (Rev 12:10; Mark 1:13; 1 Cor 7:5). In the darkness of cultures untouched by the gospel, abuse and violence abound, often without the intervention or resources of a civil justice system to combat them (Ps 74:20).

Because the prevalence of significant stress, suffering, and spiritual warfare increases the potential for missionaries to experience trauma on their fields (Irvine, Armentrout, and Miner 2006, 329), training and sending entities should urgently consider these factors. No amount or kind of training can guarantee the avoidance of trauma. However, by evaluating their own plausibility structures (their view of what is plausible in life), missionaries can prepare for unexpected troubles.[4]

Past experiences form our plausibility structures: our perception of present reality and expectations for future reality—in other words, our understanding of the world as it is and our anticipation of the world as it will be. Generally, our experiences and beliefs shape our perception, which in turn generates our assumptions of normalcy and expectations for continuity, resulting in actions and responses. For example, Russell Moore recounts the eerie silence of the orphanage nursery in Russia where he and his wife met their sons during the long process of adoption. The babies had learned that crying was pointless since no one came to meet their needs if they wept. The first time he heard his son cry, Moore knew that the little boy was convinced he had a father who would hear him. The experience of receiving parental care had changed the child's plausibility structure: he perceived that he was loved, assumed that receiving care was the new normal, and expected his father to respond if he cried (2015, 46–47).

In his discussion of stress and trauma, Mardi Horowitz employs the term "inner schemata" to represent this concept. The human mind functions from "relatively enduring structures of meaning" that form assumptions, explain the world, and guide a person's actions in it (1997, 12, 93).[5] These structures and assumptions are not static: we continually revise them in light of new events, experiences we interpret by and integrate with our schemata (92–93). Horowitz defines "a stressful life event" as an event that is dissonant with our plausibility structures; because of its dissonance, it "threatens equilibrium." Faced with such a dilemma, people do one of three things: (1)

[4] I draw the term *plausibility structure* from Peter Berger, who employs it to mean a credible view of reality that determines and explains behavior, formed in the context of social interactions (Berger 1969, 42–47).

[5] Ronnie Janoff-Bulman similarly observes that people generally function from their "conceptual system without awareness of its central postulates"; their "basic assumptions are implicit, rather than explicit" (1985, 18).

reinterpret the event to match the schemata, (2) reinterpret the event as insignificant, or (3) revise the schemata to accord with the new reality. Events of death, injury, and violence preclude the first two options (93–94). In other words, traumatic events exert strong influence because they defy integration into our existing expectations: we do not know how to interpret and respond to them. They possess the potential to overwhelm because they are antithetical to God's design for his image bearers, and they usually break the boundaries of existing plausibility structures.

Multiple sources in trauma literature connect this concept of plausibility structures with the nature of trauma itself. Encountering death and suffering can "force us to recognize, objectify, and challenge our basic assumptions" that previously went unnoticed[6] (such as, "My world is relatively safe, and I can take care of myself," or "The world is evil, but God will protect me"). Judith Herman similarly categorizes trauma's impact on a victim's "fundamental assumptions" of "the safety of the world, the positive value of the self, and the meaningful order of creation (2015, 51). Most symptoms of post-traumatic stress are "largely attributable to the shattering of victims' basic assumptions about themselves and their world" (Janoff Bulman 1985, 18). These assumptions can include their "sense of invulnerability to harm": their basic confidence that they can live ordered lives in an ordered world (Figley 1985, xviii). Valerie Rance expresses the concept this way: "Traumatic events can destroy a person's trust in the world, other people, and even his or her self-identity" (2021, 14). Essentially, the potential for stressful events to overwhelm a person and lead to PTSD is related to his or her plausibility structures.

Given that connection, and given that missions increases the likelihood of encountering potentially traumatic events, preparation for missions should include (1) raising self-awareness particularly in perception of self, the world, and God related to suffering and weakness and (2) as needed, reforming plausibility structures to accord with a biblical perspective. A distinctly Christian aim in counseling after traumatic events includes helping people understand and trust what God says about himself, his purposes, his relationship with his children, his work for and in his people now and into eternity, our response to him, and the place of death and suffering in the whole story of all that he is doing. Before sending a person into a context where he or she will almost certainly face death and suffering, we should pursue the same aim.

[6] Janoff-Bulman identifies three kinds of assumptions impacted in trauma: "(1) the belief in personal invulnerability, (2) the perception of the world as meaningful and comprehensible, and (3) the view of ourselves in a positive light" (1985, 18).

Expanding plausibility structures with relevant theological themes can provide interpretive categories for a range of experiences. This preparation may not remove the impact of those events (death and suffering do not properly belong in human experience, and intense effects and responses are natural in a dis-ordered world), but it charts a direction forward because missionaries will be better equipped to interpret those events: to some degree, they can fit into their plausibility structure. Many theological themes could be explored and applied in this process: God's providence, human dependence, God's glory, human telos, Christ's sympathy as high priest, God's presence, and more.[7] Particularly, theology of the saints' bodily resurrection is a primary support beam in a plausibility structure that can bear up beneath the weight of death and suffering. This doctrine affirms the expectation of death and personal weakness in the present world under the curse, though reframing every experience of death and its effects in light of God's power and promises.

Suffering and Resurrection

The early church exemplifies this resurrection focus. Risk in missions is no novelty; the church was born and its mission begun in a context of severe suffering: violence, imprisonment, abuse, natural calamity, and martyrdom. How did Jesus's first followers face these afflictions with unflinching hope? The bodily resurrection of Jesus radically transformed their assumptions about their own life and death, the world and their purpose in it, and the suffering they endured. In Gethsemane, the threat of club and sword had scattered the disciples to hide in panic (Matt 26:47, 56). Post-resurrection, on Pentecost, the Spirit's indwelling sent them out on mission with boldness (Acts 2:1–11). Facing severe suffering for the sake of Jesus, the believers yet persisted in gospel ministry (Acts 4:2–3; 5:29–42; 7:55–60; 8:1–4). The early church celebrated Jesus's resurrection in every gospel proclamation, and the danger of persecution was overshadowed by the Spirit-empowered courage of resurrection hope.

[7] Rance observes seven coping skills employed by biblical personalities who faced severe stress, all deriving from trust in God and corresponding to significant theological themes. Rance measured the use of these skills among missionaries who experienced trauma, concluding that such skills positively impact the missionaries' well-being post-trauma (2021, 222–36, 241).

Within this historical context, the Apostle Paul's ministry was no anomaly.[8] Throughout his epistles, the apostle honestly describes his suffering on mission yet centers his perspective on the hope of bodily resurrection, which controlled his present perceptions and future expectations. Though the resurrection is a significant theme in many texts, I will consider application from three passages illustrating how the resurrection contributed to Paul's plausibility structure. In these texts, the resurrection assures *meaning* for suffering, provides *comfort* in suffering, and promises *glory* through and after suffering.

Meaning: 1 Corinthians 15

In his first canonical letter to the saints at Corinth, Paul addresses their questions about the resurrection with his longest discourse on the topic: four movements of thought and a concluding application. First, Jesus's resurrection is essential to the gospel message and supported by eyewitness testimony (vv. 1–11). Second, the meaning of Christian faith and ministry rests on the doctrine of bodily resurrection (vv. 12–34; see Lockwood 2000, 563). Third, the resurrected body will feature both continuity and discontinuity with the temporal body (vv. 35–49). Fourth, resurrection hope includes bodily transformation and ultimate, eternal victory (vv. 50–57). In conclusion, the certainty of the resurrection guarantees ultimate meaning for faith and suffering, motivating steadfast labor in Christ (v. 58). Overall, this chapter reframes perspective on (1) death in this world and (2) weakness in the self, based on the certainty of God's work to raise the saints in Christ.

First, resurrection assumes death: in this world, experiencing suffering and death remains plausible, even certain. However, Jesus's own death and resurrection dealt a death blow to sin and all its effects, changing the meaning of death from tragedy to comedy: all will end well (vv. 3–4). Because the dead in Christ will rise, the gospel message bursts with meaning (vv. 13–16). Faith brings ultimate value and eternal forgiveness; therefore, even literal, physical death does not destroy the believer (vv. 17–18). The saints in Christ have a sure hope of life after death, and are therefore of all people most to be envied, even in the face of death (v. 19).

[8] Paul experienced multiple aspects of suffering and violence. Before his conversion, he himself had perpetrated violence against the saints (Acts 8:1–3), whom he later came to fiercely love (Gal 4:19; Phil 1:7–8; 4:1; 1 Thess 2:1–11). Paul humbly received divine grace to the glory of God, though he did not forget his past actions (1 Tim 1:12–17). During his ministry, Paul experienced profound weakness, shame, and affliction in his body. Jews and Gentiles alike responded to his preaching with violence: lashings, beatings, attempted murder, and imprisonment. Paul also suffered the threats intrinsic to first-century travel: shipwrecks, river crossings, wild animals, exposure, and thieves (2 Cor 11:23–33).

In this world, saints expect safety through dying and rising like Christ because of his promise to fully vanquish death in the world to come (vv. 20–28). Jesus's resurrection is "the firstfruits" of more to follow, promising a full harvest of resurrected saints when he returns to destroy every evil power and "deliver up the kingdom to the Father," putting every enemy "under his feet" (vv. 20, 23–25; Lockwood 2000, 569). Paul's plausibility structure includes the presence and the power of death as an enemy not yet destroyed: when he faces death and suffering, he is not bewildered (v. 26).[9] However, because of Jesus's victory through resurrection, the wounds that death presently inflicts are the flailing jabs of a dying foe, already condemned and awaiting destruction. The saints expect to suffer the sting of death but face this enemy with settled confidence that Jesus triumphs. The resurrection provides an interpretive category where we can place death and suffering to make sense of it in the whole picture of God's redemptive story.

Second, bodily resurrection also reshapes our view of personal weakness. Acutely aware of his physical weakness, Paul faced danger every hour and death every day, and the resurrection infused those afflictions with eternal meaning (vv. 29–32; cf. 2 Cor 11:16–12:10). If the resurrection were not part of his plausibility structure, hedonism would be the only sensible lifestyle. However, faith in the resurrection affected his behavior and emotions: for the sake of the gospel, Paul faced death with the expectation that danger multiplies gain for the saint. His vulnerability did not immobilize him, but rather, his hope of bodily resurrection inspired his acceptance of bodily weakness and suffering on mission.

The promise of power in the resurrection body can bear the present weight of weakness in the mortal body. Though a different kind of substance, the resurrected body will rise from the temporal body and eclipse its dishonor and weakness with glory and power (1 Cor 15:39–44).[10] Frail bodies vulnerable to death in this world are unsuited for eternal life in the world to come. Therefore, resurrection necessarily guarantees bodily transformation to inherit God's kingdom (vv. 50–51). This truth can radically transform the perspective of a saint experiencing trauma related to bodily suffering: trauma does not get the last word. God will have the last word about the bodies of his people: glorious and powerful, bearing "the image of the man of heaven" (vv. 43, 49).[11]

[9] The pangs of death still pierce the hearts of the saints, and such "grief can be an entirely appropriate manifestation of the biblical understanding that death is the enemy that has not yet been fully overcome" (Lockwood 2000, 571).

[10] As Mitchell Chase observes, "the death of the body is a sowing, and the resurrection of the body is a reaping or harvesting of what was sown"; "the body that dies is the body that rises" (Chase 2022, 126–27)

[11] In the resurrection, God will renew the saints in embodied glory, "when death and all that inevitably trails in his wake shall be swallowed up in Victory, and the body of sin delivered from all that causes its bearer, or erstwhile bearer, to groan" (Vos 1952, 309).

Paul concludes the discourse with pointed application. Resurrection hope establishes the saints "steadfast" and "immovable," fueling abundant effort "in the work of the Lord."[12] In this light, we perceive that our labors in a dangerous world and accompanying suffering in weak bodies are "not in vain," but endowed with ultimate meaning through the grace of our risen, victorious Lord (v. 58). The plausibility of death and resurrection with Jesus bolstered Paul with steadfast faith as he faced suffering and death in his labors on mission. For modern sufferers, trauma tells a story of meaning lost, but death cannot render the saint's experiences meaningless: the meaning of our lives and suffering is determined by Jesus's resurrection and promised restoration.

Comfort: 2 Corinthians 1:3–11

Suffering and comfort are interrelated themes in Paul's second canonical letter to the saints at Corinth. The apostle receives and extends comfort in his suffering, beginning in his opening remarks.[13] In the face of seemingly certain death, God comforted Paul with the sure hope of bodily resurrection. From this passage, I will draw three observations based on union with Christ and its guarantee of resurrection that can reshape the saints' perspective of suffering and self, resulting in hope and comfort.

First, Paul perceives himself in union with Christ and his body, the church, not as an autonomous entity. His own suffering was therefore just one facet of participation in union with Christ and his people; Paul did not face death alone. Further, the communal sharing of suffering with Christ ensures the sharing of comfort in Christ as well, leading to full participation in Christ's resurrection (vv. 5, 9–10).

Second, Paul and his team viewed their present encounters with death as designed to remove self-reliance and teach dependence on God "who raises the dead" (v. 9b). Confronting their own mortality removed their ability to trust their own strength. Facing death forced their focus to the God who brings life out of death. Since God would

[12] Paul follows a similar line of reasoning to the same application in Philippians 3:7–4:1. Christ's return will fulfill the transformation of redemption, making "our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (3:21). The saints will indeed attain "the resurrection from the dead" for which they strain (3:11, 13). When Jesus returns, he will "subject all things to himself," including death and its ensuing corruption (3:21; cf. 1 Cor 15:20–28). The application of this hope is steadfast life in Christ, as beloved brothers in the family of faith (4:1). All who share in Christ's suffering will share in his resurrection. Because Jesus will return and transform our bodies to glory and immortality, we can "stand firm thus in the Lord" (4:1).

[13] His introduction describes intense external and internal troubles (1:8–10). He appeals to the Corinthians from the affliction of a heart in anguish that they would know his love (2:4). Further explanation of physical suffering provides context for his perspective on the resurrection body (4:8–10, 16). The apostle commends his ministry by cataloging diverse afflictions (6:4–10). The comfort of Titus's arrival interrupts physical and emotional distress (7:4–6). The word παρακλήσις or its cognate παρακαλέω occurs ten times in 1:3–7, always translated as a form of the word *comfort*. The Greek words occur fifteen times throughout the remainder of the letter, translated as *comfort, urge, appeal, beg, entreat*.

raise the dead in Christ on the last day, Paul could calmly perceive himself as dead at present and trust God's deliverance from all distresses, rather than persisting in a delusion of personal invincibility (Gill [1809] 2005, 758).

Third, Paul was comforted and confident about present and future deliverance (vv. 9–10). The apostle's expectation may seem misplaced, given the prior martyrdom of other saints and Paul's own eventual beheading (Acts 6:54–60; 12:1–2; Eusebius, 2.25). However, their present deliverance from distress foreshadowed the future resurrection (Keener 2005, 158). Whether they would be delivered *from* death as in their most recent "deadly peril" or *through* death as in the redemptive work of Jesus, God always delivers his children. God comforted Paul and his team with the certainty of resurrection, enabling them to "set [their] hope" on his promised deliverance and draw others into prayer and praise (2 Cor 1:10–11). Whether God provides or withholds immediate deliverance from suffering and death, the resurrection guarantees ultimate deliverance and safety for saints united with Christ. Vulnerable saints facing danger need the comfort of this hope to strengthen their plausibility structures for life on mission.

Glory: 2 Corinthians 4:7–5:10

Later in the same letter, Paul discusses the method and message of new covenant ministry: with hopeful sincerity, ministers unveil the glory of Jesus in the gospel (3:19–4:6). Paul then locates his physical and spiritual suffering within that context of gospel ministry, returning to the subject of his letter's introduction: God's work in the apostle's affliction on mission. Paradoxically, the glorious gospel light resides in "jars of clay," an image of an "unexceptional" and "fragile" "throwaway container" (4:7; Guthrie 2015, 253). In verse 10, Paul elucidates this metaphor: he carries "the death of Jesus" and manifests "the life of Jesus" in his body, a fragile vessel for eternal glory. Paul's perception of suffering and self rests on the assumptions of (1) God's purposes and (2) God's promises, revealed in the glory of life through death.

First, God's purpose in human weakness is the revelation of his power through the life of Jesus in the saints (4:7–12). Through the juxtaposition of extraordinary treasure with ordinary humanity, God reveals that "the surpassing power belongs" to him and not the ministers (4:7). God intentionally entrusts the glory of the gospel to ministers with fragile bodies, subject to death. To illustrate the revelation of God's power, Paul

employs four pairs of seemingly contradictory realities.[14] In each pair, he first names affliction, perplexing trouble, persecution, and physical assault as the experience of death in union with Christ (4:8–12). Simultaneously, Paul's paradoxical perspective counters his experience of suffering: he is "not crushed," "not driven to despair," "not forsaken," and "not destroyed" (4:8–9). His confidence rests in God's shocking purpose to reveal the glorious life of Jesus in mortal bodies subject to pain and death, extending that life to other saints through the suffering (4:10–12; Gill [1809] 2005, 781). Paul submits in faith to God's purposes, perceiving the "death" of his physical weakness and affliction as a means of revealing God's power through Jesus's life in him, resulting in glory to God alone.

Second, God's purpose culminates in his promise of bodily resurrection. The weight of death could not ultimately overwhelm Paul, because resurrection power was concurrently working in him (4:10; Keener 2005, 175). Paul's faith in God's promise to raise the saints bodily "with Jesus" motivated persistent gospel proclamation, in spite of the accompanying danger and death (4:13–15; Harris 2008, 470). Paul could rejoice in the face of death, peering past its grim shadow into the light of life promised beyond: a resurrected body and God's eternal presence (4:16–5:8). He perceived the present "wasting away" of his "outer self" to be "light, momentary affliction" preparing "an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (4:16–17). The saint's "inner self" enjoys invincibility, "being renewed day by day"—focusing on the unseen, eternal reality including the "heavenly dwelling" of the resurrected body (4:16, 18–5:2; see Chase 2022, 124). Through the saints' temporal experience of suffering and death, God purposes to reveal his power in the life of Jesus and promises to draw the saints into his own eternal glory. Therefore, Paul views his physical frailty and ongoing encounters with death as conduits of incomparable glory he will experience in the life to come.

In each of these three passages, Paul interprets his experiences by the plausibility structure of God's actions and promises in Jesus. God raised Jesus from the dead. Through the Spirit, the saints are united with Jesus. Therefore, God is always present with his people, and the saints enjoy resurrection life in their spirits and anticipate its revelation in their bodies, though they expect suffering and death in the present cursed creation (Rom 8:18–23; Col 3:1–4). God's promise of bodily resurrection gives eternal meaning to temporal suffering and death, comforts saints presently feeling death's sting, and assures hope for eternal glory through and after death. Paul's durable joy and

[14] Murray J. Harris asserts that Paul "summarizes the four preceding contrasts" in verse 10. "The death of Jesus" expresses the first element of each pair, and the second elements illustrate the reality of "the life of Jesus" at work (2008, 469).

faithfulness rested on this hope. At present, given the similar prevalence of severe struggles and suffering on the field, this doctrine of bodily resurrection must significantly support the plausibility structures of saints preparing for service in missions.

Application

The following suggestions for application focus on my particular context, though principles could be related to a variety of missions-sending contexts. In the USA, three entities usually share the burden of preparing missionaries: the local church, the academy, and sending agencies. In spite of their specialized focus and often thorough sending processes, sending agencies cannot be expected to facilitate optimal evaluation and calibration of a missionary's fundamental assumptions about life and suffering before reaching the field. These things are often revealed and processed through experiences: plausibility structures form and re-form over time. Churches and academic institutions possess greater potential for discerning and shaping perceptions and expectations pre-field.

As the only biblically prescribed entity among the three, the church has ultimate responsibility for shepherding and discipling its members, including potential missionaries. The church holds the advantage of long-term personal relationship and investment, as well as spiritual authority. Therefore, when a church considers sending a member out on mission, especially to unreached fields, elders and other members should take initiative to assess many aspects of her or his life, including spiritual maturity and gifting, as well as practical equipping. Beyond these areas, elders and disciplers should help members (1) evaluate their perceptions of and expectations for self, the world, and God in relation to suffering and (2) re-form or strengthen plausibility structures to include the application of robust resurrection theology.

These two aims may be accomplished in a myriad of ways. I offer five suggestions: (1) studying and applying the above passages and others in Paul's epistles, narratives from Acts, and a broader biblical theology of suffering and resurrection; (2) reading and discussing novels and biographies with relevant themes; (3) providing preemptive counseling to consider past experiences of suffering; (4) consistently praying together for the persecuted church; and (5) serving vulnerable populations, whether in refugee communities, inner city schools, or other local mercy ministries. Beyond these, church leaders and other members should form meaningful relationships with potential

missionaries that provide continuity through the entire process of training, sending, and serving. Since the church retains primary accountability for missionaries' care (Heb 13:17), some members need to be aware of their plausibility structures both to strengthen them before they go and to continue regular care after they reach the field.

Academic institutions supply focused theological training, a major factor in the formation of durable plausibility structures. In the academy, preparation for missions cannot be relegated to missions professors, missions classes, or students claiming a missions emphasis. Every Christian responds in some way to Jesus's commission to make disciples of all nations, and every student preparing for ministry is potentially a cross-cultural missionary. Therefore, across the curriculum, theological education should cultivate a global mindset, aiming at the formation of resilient servants who will follow Jesus into and through severe suffering.

Every professor should view their students as saints who will suffer on mission and seek to aid the construction of sturdy plausibility structures with the unique but related contributions of their discipline. For instance, systematic theology provides an interpretive grid for processing otherwise inexplicable experiences. The doctrine of resurrection threads through multiple loci, creating the categories needed to accurately understand and evaluate suffering. When a missionary faces the existential problem of evil, constructing logical arguments at that time would likely fail to comfort. However, every locus contributes in advance to a theological framework that can center a sufferer on the stability of God's person and promises in those moments of severe loss. Beyond systematics, biblical studies augment perspective by locating each individual saint within the story of God's redemption, which culminates in resurrection. Scripture's narrative is essential to form a view of the resurrection that enters the narrative of our lives. No genre or division of Scripture can be overlooked: "to consider such a vibrant topic as resurrection hope, we will need the whole Bible" (Chase 2022, 16). Additionally, church history provides abundant examples of saints who faithfully suffered, committing themselves to Christ and confidently hoping in resurrection and eternal life. Finally, ministry studies refine and solidify the application of truth, providing context for the resurrection's relevance to daily life.

Furthermore, an academic emphasis in missions should include at least two classes perhaps outside the typical scope. First, a course on principles of biblical counseling, or the personal ministry of the Word, affords opportunities to cultivate self-awareness and understand the process of personal growth and change. Second, studying crisis and

trauma counseling equips potential missionaries with tools to face their own struggles as well as care for new believers and teammates. Missionaries would benefit from a basic awareness of trauma and theological perspective on trauma, including both spiritual and physical dimensions: pre-existing beliefs, the potential impact of overwhelming events, and typical responses. Missionaries need to be aware that certain physical health issues may indicate trauma or excessive stress, along with taking steps in advance to strengthen health as possible. Essentially, counseling training helps students process their own past experiences and prepare for faithful responses when suffering on mission.[15]

Conclusion

Though it is not the only relevant doctrine, bodily resurrection contributes essential perspective to the formation of plausibility structures able to bear the weight of death and suffering. Missions training should include guidance to carefully evaluate perceptions of and expectations for self, the world, and God. The doctrine of bodily resurrection should be thoroughly understood and applied to those perceptions and expectations. Trauma often unravels a person's concept of a meaningful existence in an ordered world; however, like the apostle Paul's, our perception of meaning must be re-ordered according to God's eternal purposes and not our own independent self-conception (1 Cor 15:50–57; 2 Cor 4:7, 15). Death and danger neither conclude our story nor determine its ultimate meaning: Jesus does. Through death and resurrection, Jesus accomplished the work of redemption and inaugurated his total victory (1 Cor 15:25–28). The resurrection frees the saint to perceive suffering and death not as the end of meaning but as a momentary trouble, trusting God to accomplish his good designs in his world. The most plausible outcome is the one God has guaranteed: eternal life with him, in a resurrected body and a renewed world.

[15] Additionally, such classes would address the need that Rance sees for pre-field training in "interpersonal skills and conflict resolution" (2021, 238–39).

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"Church Planting as Improvisation": Learning Spirit-led, Principled Flexibility from Effective Practitioners in the Middle East

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Frontier church planters can labor for years with precious little fruit. Then one day, a report emerges of a breakthrough in a similarly difficult context. Outsiders visit and verify and research this unique kingdom advance. A key leader publishes a book and launches a training which distills this movement into memorable and reproducible steps that anyone anywhere could apply in their context. A group of supporters vigorously advocate for the new method as the next, best available path to reaching the least reached. A group of skeptics equally vigorously raise the alarm of the unique dangers this radical new method poses to the prevailing, trustworthy approach to ministry. It is a familiar story often repeated in the frontier missions world desperate for encouragement and guidance toward increased fruitfulness in hard places.[1]

Weary of such black-and-white, either-or debates which seem preoccupied with finding the "right method" or ministry formula, a growing number of voices have instead advocated for an emphasis on recovering a spirit of innovation and adaptability to navigate the diverse, changing contexts in which least-reached people live. Ted Esler (2022), president of MissioNexus, captures this theme, highlighting obstacles to innovation from the occupational culture of frontier practitioners, offering tips for overcoming them and cultivating an experimental approach needed to reach the least reached. Trevor Larsen (2022), a fruitful mentor to movement leaders in Southeast Asia, similarly emphasizes the role of ministry experimentation, evaluation, and adaptation as key to his leaders' discovery of fruitful practices. Along these lines, Warrick Farah (October 2022 email correspondence), founder of the Motus Dei Network and a leading researcher of Church-Planting Movements (CPMs), observes that, "It seems that

[1] I am grateful to Timothy M. Stafford, Ted Esler, and Warrick Farah, for their feedback on an earlier version of this article.

each movement is actually an innovation in a context and not the implementation of a method/formula."[2]

Can we glean lessons from frontier breakthroughs while retaining the flexibility needed participate in God's mission in a diverse, changing world? Perhaps we might learn something from those through whom God has planted his church in difficult, volatile contexts. In this article, I draw upon my analysis of five fruitful practitioners who have planted churches among BMBs (Believers of Muslim Background) in the diverse, dynamic region of the Middle East. These examples of contemporary church formation suggest to us a picture of church planting, not as a formula to be implemented, but as an activity of collective improvisation. These practitioners present to us an example of skillful participation in the mission of God among the least reached which involve the collective, improvisational synergy of (1) the Holy Spirit, (2) the initiative of local believers, and (3) input from disciple makers within a principled framework. If we replace the image of "church planting as formula implementation" with an image of "church planting as collective improvisation," we are better equipped to constructively evaluate church-planting trends, navigate effective local-expat partnerships, and effectively adapt our church-planting efforts among frontier people groups in a rapidly changing world.

Drawing upon jazz theory, I first identify two key features of improvisation which are especially relevant to illuminating effective church-planting praxis. I then provide an overview of the church-formation research itself. Next, I unpack examples of this "improvisational" praxis that emerge from these five fruitful church planters, followed by summary conclusions and implications for frontier mission today.

"All that Jazz": Defining Improvisation

While notoriously difficult to define, jazz would not be jazz without improvisation (Edgar 2022, 9).[3] Improvisation can be defined as "a spontaneous creation of melody" (Rose 1985), not *ex nihilo* but in terms of "variation" (Hinz 1995, 33). To unpack this further: "The simplest method of improvisation takes a preexisting melody—a song known by millions or an original composition by a member of the band—and varies it. This method, melodic paraphrase, typically adds notes and distorts the rhythm into

[2] Farah's "adaptive missiological engagement" in Islamic contexts likewise highlights the importance of attending to the diversity that exists in Muslim communities rather than searching for a single model of ministry (Farah 2018).

[3] William Edgar defines jazz in terms of five essential aspects: (1) "simple and significant structures," (2) improvisation, (3) not one single style in one era but a family of sub-styles that evolved over time, (4) a "music of protest" (i.e., the blues), and (5) an implicit "narrative from deep sorrow to inextinguishable joy" (Edgar 2022, 9).

something that swings, but does not disguise the source material" (Kane 2012, 38). A careful listener to improvisation will also observe that not only melody, but other musical elements like rhythm and harmony, can be varied and improvised. Within this very basic framework, two key features of improvisation are of special significance in illuminating church-planting praxis: spontaneity within structure, and collective synergy.

Spontaneity Within Structure

The spontaneity of improvisation is not chaotic; it takes place within certain patterns. In *A Supreme Love: Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel*, Edgar (2022, 6-7) notes,

> It is true that jazz allows for considerable freedom, but it always takes place within a form. The form may vary, but it is usually a set number of harmonies (musicians call them 'changes') over a particular rhythm. The best musicians tell a story, using those changes as a guide.

Edgar highlights the chord progression ("changes") and rhythm as two structures within which musicians improvise.

There are other structures as well, such as the melodic direction of the song (typically established at the beginning and recalled at the end).[4] "Tradition" and jazz "social conventions" also create structure for improvisation:

> Jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis says, 'Jazz is not just, "well, man, this is what I feel like playing." It's a very structured thing that comes down from a tradition.'" ... The jazz musician first listens to artists across time, then begins to emulate jazz masters, playing solo transcriptions and learning riffs played by the greats. In time the musician finds an original voice, but only within the context of listening and emulating what has gone before them. (Kane 2012, 38, citing Berliner, *Jazz*, p.289)

[4] Another important structure is the overall song form. The 12-bar blues "has its origin in African American folk poetry, featuring a distinctive, asymmetric three-line stanza" (Giddens and DeVeaux 2009, "Jazz Form and Improv," 26). This form "may be packed with extended chords and fanciful substitutions, and its structured interrupted by composed transitions and contrasting sections, yet the same basic form remains—and has remained mother's milk in jazz to this day. It has withstood countless musical fashions …. There is no such thing as a jazz musician who can't make something of a twelve-bar blues" (Ibid, 31). An alternative, but also popular, song structure includes the 32-bar AABA song. Giddens and DeVeaux note that "The idea behind the form is pretty basic. Compose an eight-bar phrase. Repeat it. Contrast it with a new eight-bar phrase (known as the bridge or release or middle section), ending with a half cadence to drive the piece forward. Then repeat the original phrase one last time" (Ibid, 32). Both the 12-bar blues and the 32-bar AABA song provides a known structure, which overlays chord changes, rhythm, and melodic direction, within which musicians will improvise.

The jazz tradition provides a shared structure within which all musicians draw from and improvise within.[5] Improvisation is not a simple free-for-all; it is an activity that takes place within the structure of these behavioral norms, the tradition in which they are passed on, as well as known chords and rhythms.

These jazz structures are what can be called "minimal structures," in contrast to the more rigid structures of classical music. Classically-trained musicians are "aware of the elements of a notated composition; the improviser is aware of scales, intervals, harmony, chord structures, and other musical elements. In the improviser's hands, however, these musical elements become malleable" (Hinz 1995, 32). While classical music is more of a "composer's art," jazz music is more of a "performer's art," because "the performer of a notated work has no influence on the style and vocabulary of the piece, unlike the improviser, who directly influences a piece's style and vocabulary" (ibid., 33).

This feature of "structured improvisation" is particularly useful in capturing fruitful church planting in my Middle East case studies, as is a second feature—its communal synergy.

Improvisation as Collective Activity

Although there are solos in jazz, improvisation is not a solo activity, but "a unique form of interactive creativity, centered on group processes in real time rather than the eventual product of an individual" (Macdonald and Wilson 2006, 59). The spontaneity within structure occurs in relational synergy, and "musicians will deliver unrehearsed lines and rhythms and respond to each other's spontaneous contributions while (usually) maintaining a common tempo through repetitions of a harmonic framework" (Macdonald and Wilson, 59).

Different members of the band play different set roles in this process. The bass, percussion, and harmony instruments (piano, guitar, etc.) each uphold a different part of the overall structure in ways which seek to inspire and accompany the main soloist (trumpet, saxophone, etc.), as different instruments taking turns in soloing throughout

[5] Along with this are several social conventions that all are expected to know and follow:

> Behavioural norms include: the nominal leader, who decides which songs to play and in what key; the soloist, who determines the style and embellishment; and the use of a chorus, which restates the basic theme. Band members use a combination of hand signals and eye contact to communicate change in tempo, the beginning and ending of soloing, call-and-response exchanges, and so forth. There is an unspoken understanding of the need to respect and comply with these basic guidelines for action, for without them, the improvisational process would degenerate into chaos. (Kamoche and Cunha 2001, 746)

the piece. In the process, "The members of the band have to listen to one another, exchange ideas and find mutual inspiration" (Kane 2012, 38).

These features of jazz improvisation have stimulated inspiration in Christian ethics (Kane, 37), missiology (Corrie 2014, 299), and in the business world (Kamoche and Cunha 2001, 733-34). In the church-formation research detailed next, jazz improvisation illumines a fresh way to think about fruitful church-planting praxis in the diverse, changing contexts of frontier mission.

Overview of Church-Formation Research

To prepare for a training session on church formation, I interviewed five church-planting practitioners who had been involved in the formation of at least one church of BMBs in the Middle East. Conducted in the fall of 2022, the research consisted of a written interview with 14 questions, clarified by follow-up questions via email, Signal, or Zoom, which I transcribed.

The five cases each come from different contexts across the Middle East. One interview was co-answered by a male BMB and a woman from a Western country. Another participant was a native Arabic speaker who answered the written questions in Arabic and follow-up questions in English. The remaining three were church planters from Western cultures and native English speakers.

The participants were asked about the nature of the churches that they helped to start, the story of their formation, their definition of church, obstacles faced, and advice for fellow church planters. Some of the participants were involved in the formation of a single congregation, while others were involved in a network of multiple house groups/churches.

The participants' definitions of church varied some, though all had a common core that is familiar to most frontier workers. At the same time, many also recognized the natural development that happens over time in church planting with different groups at different stages at varying moments in its life cycle. Among these cases, there are also some groups and churches which, depending on one's definition, could potentially be considered "embryonic" churches—in the process of moving toward "church"—while others would be considered having already crossed the threshold of being "church," while still on the journey toward a spiritually mature church (Antonio 2023, 13; cf. Waterman 2011, 465-67).

All cases represented fresh breakthrough in places or people groups which were previously unchurched. Most were in relatively conservative communities with varying degrees of proximity to Westernized sectors of society. No cases were "ideal" lacking past (and ongoing) challenges. Each reflected a unique church formation story:

1- A BMB national and a Western woman helped a group of relatives transition from a friendship group into the first known church in their tribe, co-led by the woman and three BMBs.

2- A national believer and his wife started a Discovery Bible Study in a church with refugees, which grew and then split into geographically based house groups. Through tangible service and mobilizing and mentoring refugees as leaders, these groups multiplied into a growing network of believer groups and embryonic churches.

3- A Western church planter and his wife, utilizing simple ways of equipping and empowering new believers to share their faith with their relational network and to baptize and disciple people into house churches, helped form and coach a network of house churches and embryonic churches in Shi'ite communities.

4- A Western church planter, in partnership with other workers over many years, helped to disciple and network together different believers in an urban area, who later scattered throughout the country due to instability. They then began to grow and reproduce along familial and tribal lines while remaining networked together because of their long-time relationships in the first city.

5- A Western church planter and his wife, along with cross-cultural and near-cultural teammates, saw two streams of church develop as a result of media ministry. One stream was an embryonic church which developed and spread organically in a single extended family. The second stream was a church which began as a baptism class for various believers from multiple Arab nationalities that continued to meet and then developed into an indigenously led church.

After collecting the interviews, I synthesized these five cases of church planting and assessed them for relevance in my own context and similar contexts in the Middle East. I identified several significant themes or issues which I believe deserve consideration (Antonio 2023). A critical element that emerged was a picture of fruitful church planting as involving collective, improvisational synergy of the Holy Spirit, initiative of

local believers, and wise disciple-making within a principled framework. The basic jazz awareness outlined above highlights fresh insight that stimulate our thinking and practice in frontier church planting.

Vignettes of Church-Planting Improvisation in the Middle East

I will focus on two aspects of church-planting "improvisation" in the Middle East: collective synergy involved in church planting, and spontaneous creativity within a structured framework.

Collective Synergy in Fruitful Church Planting

Who is responsible for "planting/building" Christ's church? We might answer in one of three different ways. Traditional church planting often assumes *the expat missionary* to be the one who "plants" the church, after the model of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 3:9). Others, however, might advocate for *local indigenous believers* to take the lead and be empowered to plant and shape the church from the beginning; the cross-cultural worker shifts to a facilitator role (cf. Steffan 2011). Still others might answer that it is *Jesus himself* who "will build my church" (Matt. 16:18), hence we should abandon "church planting" terminology altogether in favor of "disciple making" or "Word sowing" as more accurately conveying the cross-cultural workers' role (cf. Miller and Little 2022, 103).

But what if the answer is "all of the above?" The five cases of recent church plants in the Middle East which I studied paint a picture of divine-human *and* local-outsider synergy, which faintly resembles the collective improvisation of a jazz ensemble. Perhaps the planting or building of Christ's church is an act of God, external disciplers, and local believers, all at once.

To begin with, each church-formation story clearly shows evidence of *a supernatural act of God*. In some cases, healing played an instrumental role in bringing the initial person in the network to faith. In another, it was expressed in a divine appointment which connected a local with a foreigner who proclaimed the gospel and brought that person to faith. Another example can be seen in the clear leading of the Spirit of the initial embryonic group of believers to discern that God wanted them to start a house church in a way they neither expected nor anticipated. Yet another example shows God's fingerprints in the expansion and reproduction of believers through significant

societal upheaval and persecution. In one way or another, each of the five cases reflect God's clear fingerprints in the formation of the churches.

The divine intervention in each story, however, did not exclude human agency. Regarding the local aspect, one common theme is the way that each of the cases include the clear *empowerment and involvement of the local disciples* in the process of church formation. In a few cases, the disciple makers partnered with same-culture or near-culture believers, either on the church-planting team, or in the actual decision process to plant a church. In several cases, equipping local disciples was an intentional, integral part of the disciple-making approach from the beginning. In a couple cases, security or instability forced the network to rely upon local involvement through the exit of foreign disciple makers from that context, leading to distance mentoring which required increased local responsibility. Rather than outside church planters being front and center as the sole human agent seeking to "plant" a church, these effective church planters all mobilized and empowered the local disciples to play significant roles in forming and leading these churches.

The outside church planters, however, were not passive observers in the process; they intentionally interacted with the local disciples in a symbiotic relationship between indigenous activity and *cross-cultural input and initiative*. The intercultural team of three nationals and the Western female discipler is a good example. Although she listened and deferred to her local partners, she acknowledged ways that she and another more mature believer played a guiding and directive role at times, particularly in helping the group clearly engage the biblical teaching on the nature of the church early on, and later in helping to mentor the mature believer to take over the main teaching role in the church.

Another example of this indigenous-outsider interplay is the "baptism class"-turned-church. Though the outside disciple maker initially cast the vision for the class to be a training experience which they could reproduce in their families, the local group requested at the conclusion of the class that they continue meeting together. The disciple maker was receptive to this local initiative, continuing to meet and host the meetings, while intentionally guiding the group in the direction of an indigenously led and indigenously hosted church. Throughout the process, the locals actually resisted every move toward more indigenous leadership, but the disciple maker pushed back on this local preference and persisted in his vision toward an indigenous church. The group did eventually shift to an indigenously led and organized church, while the original disciple maker shifted into an outside mentoring role.

A final example of indigenous-outsider synergy is the way several locals approached the cross-cultural workers to request help with discipling their children who were forced to attend Islamic classes every day. The cross-cultural workers were receptive to this request, but they did so in an intentional way that sought to direct it towards a goal of local sustainability and fruitful church formation. Though agreeing to host and lead a regular bi-weekly gathering to help teach kids about the Bible, they required at least one parent to be present, casting vision for the believers to learn a model of home-based discipleship in the future. This combination of listening to and involving local disciples, along with intentional direction and input from disciple makers, led to an important breakthrough in their church-formation efforts, resulting in strong bonds among the families which continued to knit the whole network together even after they all relocated in other places in the country. As the research participant noted, this involved "a combination of casting vision to the local believers, but also listening to the local believers as to what is going to work in that season" (Interview 5).

Rather than the sole activity of either God, the outside church planter, or the indigenous believers, effective church planting in these five church plants involved collaborative synergy in which all three parties were involved. A divine work of God (1 Cor. 3:6—7; Matt. 16:18; Acts 1:8), in collaboration with divine image-bearers (1 Cor. 3:9), both external agents (Matt. 28:19—20) and local agents (Acts 8:4; Acts 10:33; Col. 1:7)—church planting might echo the collective synergy of a musical band engaging in the enterprise of jazz improvisation.

Church planting reflects not only this collective interactive collaboration; it also reflects spontaneous adaptability within form.

Creative Flexibility of Church Planters within Structure

The interviews of these five practitioners did not suggest a picture of rigid implementation of a single, consistent formula or method. No two church-formation stories were the same; a variety of approaches and combinations were reflected in the handful of reported churches/networks. And like jazz improvisation, it was not chaotic, but in the context of a framework of principles.

All cases represented some degree of flexibility and creative adaptability. However, in all cases, the practitioners worked within a clearly defined set of principles for biblical discipleship and indigenous churches, with a goal of building toward eventual multiplication among multiple streams. Two of the practitioners began with one

approach and later adjusted approaches when the situation changed or they were exposed to new information or training. In one case, a practitioner employed two different church planting approaches simultaneously. With one group, he employed an "aggregate"-style approach in connecting people who did not know each other into a new congregation; with another group, his team employed a relational-network (*oikos*) approach which worked with a group of believing relatives to help form them into a church.

Another example of improvisational adaptation involved a female worker from a Western country and a BMB national, who co-planted a church primarily consisting of BMBs within a particular tribe and familial group. The church plant took shape in a way that was completely unexpected to the female worker:

> This was not my plan when moving to the city. To be honest, I have never considered myself a church planter as a single, Western female (despite some experience with church planting in another [Muslim]-dominated country). But as I had many, many conversations with the believers in this city and tribe, it became obvious that a house church was where God was leading all of our hearts. I listened much more than I spoke. I sought advice from others. The last thing I wanted was to make the church westernized. I spent hours and hours in daily conversation with the three MBBs that joined with me to plant the church. We went through some incredibly difficult times together. I had to be much more vulnerable than was natural for me and allow myself to be open to criticism. I certainly received lots of criticism along the way from other foreign workers who were not involved with the situation. But my leadership and mentors fully supported me and helped guide me. (Interview 3)

The female worker demonstrated an openness to the leading of the Spirit and the input of her BMB friends, which allowed her to adapt her mindset and practice to a process of church formation that she did not expect. At the same time, her answers to the questions showed that she had a clear framework that she worked within, including a clear definition of "church" and a strong commitment to indigenous church principles, which guided her own constructive input into the process.

One of the more poignant illustrations of this improvisational flexibility is found in an established network of house churches in a volatile context. A key lesson emphasized

by the research participant was the importance of being willing to flex one's approach in response to changing circumstances:

> Everybody's looking for, "what's the secret, what's the formula, how did it work?" … looking back, it's kind of like, "I don't know, exactly." I look back … and I say, "Oh that was a really important strategic thing we did there." But at the time, we didn't necessarily think it was that strategic. We just thought, "OK, we're just responding to what's being asked … to a need." And, so, at that time, that worked well. And then the situation changed … and it didn't work quite as well. … And so [we started asking] "What now? What can work in this environment?" … It changed organically as the situation changed. And I think that's perhaps maybe the biggest [lesson]. (Interview 5)

The biggest breakthrough in this network was strategic only in retrospect; in reality, it was the result of a spirit of adaptability of this fruitful team. This improvisational spirit came easier for some than for others:

> We've lost some workers that were partnering with us over the years, because the plan changed, and they liked the old plan. … I understand that. I'm a fairly methodical person myself. … That's something we have to stretch and grow in, those of us that are less like that. Now my colleague who I mentioned, who has this apostolic gifting … I swore he stayed up at night just dreaming up ideas to make my life miserable … he was always coming in with new thoughts, new ideas … and those "ideas people" … can adapt more easily to changes. … I don't usually like to use military terminology, but we are working in … enemy territory. … The environment's going to be changing around us all the time. We need to be flexible and adaptive in order to continue the growth that starts. There are people who I have seen stick very methodically [to their original plan]. The ones that I've seen … that have stuck very methodically [to their original plan] … they mostly continue on, [with] a small group of local believers. But 10 or 20 years later, it's still that small group—maybe smaller. (Interview 5)

In this participant's view, a more methodical approach is less fruitful in the long-term than one in which the church-planting team is open to change and improvises with the constantly changing landscape.

Legendary jazz trumpeter Miles Davis famously said that a note is only "wrong" based on the next note played.[6] These skillful church planters seem to embody a similarly flexible, responsive approach. To depict improvisation a free for all lacking all boundaries would be to misunderstand both jazz and church planting. As skillful improvisors flexibly adapt to the dynamic set of notes played by various members of the ensemble, they do so within the structures of known jazz chords, rhythms, traditions, and behavioral conventions—or else it would not be jazz. Similarly, the responsive, creative flexibility of these church-planting improvisors took place within the grounding structures of Scripture and responsible missiological principles.

A willingness on the part of church planters to adapt and improvise, within a set of biblical and practical principles, is significant for understanding effective church formation. Like jazz musicians, fruitful church planters collaborate with local disciples and the Holy Spirit in church formation. Rather than rigidly following a classical musical score, they improvise and adapt freely within the structure of their principles of indigenous, biblical discipleship and church formation.

Conclusion

Church planting among least-reached communities is a humanly impossible, foolhardy venture. While frontier practitioners are eagerly searching for and debating the best formula, process, or method to achieve that elusive kingdom breakthrough in the hardest places, other perspectives and images might supplement these discussions by stimulating our imagination with a fresh vision of the nature of the task and our role in it.

In this article, I suggested that five fruitful practitioners who have recently planted churches among BMBs in the Middle East resemble, not those who have discovered or mastered the perfect formula, but skillful and sensitive improvisers in a flexible, principled collaboration with God and with local believers. There is much more to be learned from exploring other aspects of the jazz improvisation model, evaluating other church-formation case studies within and outside the Middle East, and exploring further the specific principles that structure effective church-planting improvisation.

[6] I'm grateful to curriculum design scholar (and jazz musician) Dr. Timothy M. Stafford for this insight and reference.

It is important to highlight what is not concluded in this research. My study focuses on church formation, not church longevity; it focuses on the process and factors of groups forming into churches, not on the factors that enables churches to remain and grow to health and maturity—also a worthy and needed study. Additionally, my research does not make universal claims for all frontier church planting contexts, or even for the whole Middle East region. Rather, it seeks to understand and describe what possible insight emerges from these five examples of church plants in a volatile region. The five examples of church-planting breakthroughs are unfinished stories, and each has its own ongoing challenges which go beyond the scope of this study.

We can give thanks to God that in the hardest of places, he is building his church. In doing so, perhaps he is not doing so unilaterally, making us passive observers; nor is he hiding some secret formula somewhere, withholding breakthrough until a genius unlocks it for the rest of the frontier mission community to implement mechanistically. Perhaps God is instead inviting us to pick up the instruments and gifts he has given us, listen to and collaborate with our local disciples and with the Holy Spirit, and create music together as we trust the Spirit to bring fresh breakthrough in our distinctive contexts, in his time and in his way.

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Motivating the Next Generation in the U.S. to Missions

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Introduction

While motivating the next generation to engage in global missions, is not really a new concern (every generation has had its challenges); the context we find ourselves in today in the U.S. has various unique aspects that are new compared to the past. As a college professor of missions, I have seen shifts in the attitudes of students towards missions who are attending college and even for those taking missions classes. This is heightened with the awareness that I am also seeing far less interest in studying missions than 20 years ago.

This context could be called a New Frontier that has to be explored to understand the challenges that are faced in current and future efforts to motivate today's younger generation towards missions, and the factors that demotivate them towards missions' engagement. An important part of this New Frontier, are the changes in demographics of those being recruited, as the younger generation in the US is increasingly diverse in ethnicity and culture.

An incident a few years ago, opened my eyes to just how different the younger generations are. In a class focusing on intercultural competencies, I had frequently used an episode from an older edition of *Star Trek* to help explore cultural differences such as honor. A comment from a student led me to shift directions. The student made the statement that the action was too slow. Essentially it was boring. But check your stereotypes, this was a female student.

While various authors have addressed the question of motivation and engagement in global missions amongst today's youth from different perspectives, this is an attempt to organize the variety of challenges that are being faced; as well as recognizing that

there are potential positives to be found in the younger generations. Rather than throwing our collective hands up in despair, we are called to understand this "New Frontier" in which we are educating and recruiting for missions. Thus, the focal question of this article is "What challenges and opportunities are present in motivating younger generations to career service in global cross-cultural missions?"

Obstacles and Challenges

Attitudes Towards Missions

Gen Z—those born in and since 1997 (Dimock 2019) —is growing up in a world that is notably different than that of previous generations. While the idea that the U.S. is now a post-Christian nation is commonly discussed, many of the differences faced in mobilizing for global missions in the future are unique to Gen Z members.

Gen Z's disinterest in missions engagement

While all generations in mission are influenced by aspects of post-modernism and tolerance, the cultural influences on youth today go far beyond those factors. Gen Z is described as being global in terms of connections through technology (Erlacher and White 2022, 43), having grown up in "relativism and pluralism" (46), having been over-protected by parents (48), being extremely individualistic (56), seeking happiness as "the meaning of life" (57), and being risk averse (58). None of these attitudes seem particularly conducive to responding to a call to missions.

Missions is colonialism

An attitude that sprouted among many millennials, but has grown excessively among Gen Z is the perspective that missions is tied to a negative colonial past. As one millennial summarizes "Missions, so it goes, is the old handmaiden of colonialism" (Bush and Wason 2017, 2).[1] In part this reflects the common view of many anthropologists that Christianity leads to "a 'loss' of indigenous culture" (Bush and Wason 2017, 3). In essence, Gen Zers are asking: What right does anyone in our world have to impose their perspective on others? When Gen Zers reflect on the past, it seems self-evident to them that there has been much, and often more, wrong done by missionaries than good. This outlook persists in spite of significant discussion that the good from Protestant missions far outweighs the negative. One significant work on this

[1] *Millennials and the Mission of God* is a conversation between a Boomer, Andrew Bush, and a Millennial, Carolyn Wason. Quotes are attributed to each author as appropriate.

is Robert Woodberry's argument that democracy has been spurred by the work of Protestant Mission (2012). Yet it is possible that those who hold this position would argue that democracy is an imposition. After all, if one assumes that "missions is, in fact, an 'imposition' of a certain worldview and conformity to that view, isn't Western missions just a sneaky from of neocolonialism?" (Bush and Wason 2017, 3). Fortunately, this is not a call to cease missions totally; Millennial Carolyn Wason, goes on to say, "Millennials are not sure that Western missions is a path towards changing the world for the better. As a millennial, I think missions needs to change. But as a Christian who believes in the important of missions, I am not sure what such a change might be" (Bush and Wason 2017, 4). The danger for Gen Z seems to be that many have moved a step further and seem to have fully accepted the "perception of missions being enmeshed with oppression and injustice" (Erlacher and White 2022, 21).

In response to Wason, Andrew Bush, a Boomer, suggests that Western missions can reconfigure itself to alleviate the problems of the past (Bush and Wason 2017, 6-7). He also indicates that there needs to be a broader recognition of the impact of globalization. Bush points out that "Western commerce, entertainment, sports, internet technology, and education reach into the most remote corners of the world" (Bush and Wason 2017, 7). As he discusses this broader reality, he observes that in comparison "Western missions as a colonial threat seems almost quaint" (Bush and Wason 2017, 7). Bush's call does challenge the missions' community to continue its focus on contextualization and encouraging the global church to not be Western by default (Bush and Wason 2017, 7-8).

Given this negative attitude towards past global missions, we have to ask how widely this impacts those in the church. Steve Richardson (2022) reports that in a survey of individuals who are engaged in missions in some way, of 120 respondents, 47 percent indicated "that the perception that missions harms cultures 'somewhat' or 'very much' influences believers" (131). Furthermore, 37 percent "rated this idea as 'quite common' or 'almost universal' with the North American Church" (131). It would appear that this is indeed a common attitude in the church that could impact missions recruiting.

This perspective may be connected with the common U.S. cultural trend to embrace tolerance. As Richardson (2022, 137) indicates, this persuasion to tolerance may be based "on the assumption that all cultures are inherently good." While recognizing that harm has been done by missionaries (though less than other aspects of globalization and governments), the challenge that Richardson (149) gives us is to "distinguish

between the core task of global missions and the faulty and ethnocentric ways it has sometimes been carried out."

Everything is missions

The moniker "everything is missions" that is frequently used in many churches, at first, does not appear to be against missions. That this attitude is likely a barrier to global missions engagement seems clearer as there has been a shift over time away from using the terms missions and missionaries exclusively for sharing "the gospel in a long-term, full-time, cross-cultural capacity, usually overseas" (Richardson 2022, 58).These terms now are used to basically include "any activity of the church, including ministering within local congregations, serving the poor, and fighting injustice" (58). Richardson (2022, 60) also notes that of the 120 individuals surveyed, 73 percent indicated that they "included 'everything is missions' in their top three choices" as to what keeps people from being involved in global missions. While this may seem like a semantic argument, the church has to figure out how to keep cross-cultural missions alive as we face this trend.

Every Christian is a missionary

Denny Spitters (2017) in one of his chapters, addresses the question *Is every Christian a missionary?* He starts the chapter with mentioning the common exit sign seen in churches "You are now entering the mission field" (Spitters and Ellison, 2017, 65). Likewise, it is logical that if everything we do is missions, then whenever we leave the church, we are in fact entering the mission field. Surprisingly, this is not new as Spitters quotes Count Ludwig Von Zinzendorf as saying "Missions, is simply this: every heart with Christ is a missionary, every heart without Christ a mission field" (Spitters and Ellison 2017, 67). While we may not figure out a perfect answer to the question, simply answering that every Christian is a missionary certainly makes it harder to keep global and cross-cultural outreach as a central component of the local church's engagement.

Missions confusion

Another dynamic in the barriers to global missions engagement is a growing uncertainty in the church about what its global role should look like. This stems from a genuine effort by the church to answer the question *What is our Mission?* How we answer this question depends on how we understand four key words "Mission, Missions, Missional, and the Missio Dei" (Spitters and Ellison 2017, 33), words whose distinctions we often muddy and overlap. I imagine that most of us have been in multiple discussions that have endeavored to determine the difference between *Mission* and

Missions, for example. The gist of Spitters' discussion is that the failure to carefully differentiate these terms can lead to a loss of focus on global missions, particularly in discipling the nations. He calls us to be "committed to walking the path of God's redemptive mission, culminating in the collective worship of the Lamb by all nations, peoples, tribes, and tongues" (Spitters and Ellison 2017, 48). No matter which term we use, the church has to find a way to keep in front of its people the on-going reality of the need for the ethnic nations to hear, no matter where they may be located.

U.S. Demographics and Missions

Simple demographic data in regard to age trends and ethnic diversity tell us that the U.S. is changing, which adds to the new frontier in which missions recruitment takes place.

The aging of Evangelicals

First, in relation to age trends: the U.S. population from ages 18-29 in 2023 was only 15.7 percent (Marketing Charts 2024) and was 17 percent of Evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center 2024a). While this reflects that this group is consistent in size in the church it is a much smaller portion in comparison to those who are from ages 30-49 which comprises 33% of Evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center 2024a). Both in the U.S. population and in the Evangelical Church there are fewer younger adults to recruit for missions.

Evangelicals are increasingly less white

Second, missions recruiting also has to focus on the overall demographic changes in ethnicity in the U.S. As the U.S. continues to become less white—it is projected Whites will be a minority (less than 50% of US population) by 2045 (Blake 2023)—both the church and global missions recruitment will need to work within this new reality. We noted above that when all ethnic groups are considered together, 15.7 percent of the U.S. population is in the 18-29 age range. However, it is noteworthy that among Hispanic Evangelicals, 26 percent are in the 18-29 age category (Pew Research Center 2024b). This is a considerable difference and is significant for the future of missions as young evangelical Hispanics are a larger part of their evangelical group than are young whites.

The lack of ethnic diversity in missions

While these numbers reflect that the times are changing, there is, however, a lag in

relation to ethnic diversity within missions engagement. 2021 data from Missio Nexus tells us that 76 percent of missions organization staffing is White/Caucasian but only 56.7 percent of the U.S. population fits that category. At a greater difference, the Hispanic population is at 18.7 percent of the U.S. population but only 6 percent of mission organization staffing is Hispanic. Slightly better is that Blacks are at 12.1 percent of the population and 7% of mission organization staffing. The most positive ethnic engagement is that of Asian/Pacific Islanders who together compose 5.9 percent of the U.S. population yet represent 8 percent of mission organization staffing. Together, the minority population groups, which compose 42.2 percent of 2021 U.S. population, represents only 21 percent of mission staffing. It is important to note that this data does not indicate age groups. Further, for those who are involved in strictly sending organizations the number of those engaged in going skews more towards white Caucasians (Mission Nexus 2021).

That recruiting for missions has to focus more on minority populations of color is even more evident when looking at the even younger minorities as a percent of population. U.S. public schools census data shows that in 2021 White students were 45.2 percent, Hispanic students were 28.4 percent, Black students were 14.9%, Asian and Pacific Islanders were 5.8%, and 5.6 percent were American Indian and others (Statista 2024). In our schools Whites are already a minority.

Black Churches and Missions

Black Churches and Black Christians have a long history in the United States, but much of that history is marred by slavery and the ensuing struggles for freedom and civil rights. While the early history of Blacks in missions has recently come increasingly to light, it is important to understand the current dynamics of the Black Church's engagement, or lack of, with global missions.

Blacks mostly do not engage in global missions

In a 2004 article, James Sutherland (2004, 500) estimated that there were 300-500 Black missionaries from the U.S. At the time, that estimate represented only 1 percent of the U.S. missionary force (500-501). Sutherland goes on to identify various causes for this low number when, in 2004, Blacks made up 13 percent of the U.S. population (501). If Blacks had been proportionally represented in missions, they should have numbered over 5,500 missionaries given that there were 43,000 U.S. missionaries at the time. There has not been a significant change in this reality. Michele Raven (2017, 163) notes, "the black church is not participating in sending in numbers proportionate to the

number of African Americans in the church." Raven (174) notes that in 2012, Blacks represented only ".024 percent of the missionary force sent from the United States.

Changes of Blacks engaged in missions organizations

While this low level of engagement reflects the current status of global missions engagement, it has not always been the case. Earlier in U.S. missions history, there were frequently black missionaries who left the United States (Raven 2017; Saunders 2022). The decline of Blacks in global missions is attributed at least, in part, to an outcome of white missionary leaders excluding Blacks "after reconstruction because they feared negative responses by colonial government to freed African Americans and mixing races among missionaries" (Raven 2017, 173). In response Black churches formed their own missions groups and went out independently. In time the number of Black missions groups largely diminished once Jim Crow became "the law of the land" (Raven 173).

Black Churches focus on their own marginalized people

Today the Black church's limited engagement in global missions is often considered to stem from Blacks being preoccupied with "helping African Americans survive slavery and racism" (Sutherland 2004, 501). Along with the colonial attitudes and practices that hindered Blacks from being allowed to serve (501-502), Sutherland indicates that there were limited educational opportunities for Blacks—particularly in Southern States where they predominantly have lived (502).

Current attitudes within the Black church continue to limit recruiting. It appears that many within Black churches reflect the need to help in their own neighborhoods to the point of criticizing Blacks who engage elsewhere (Sutherland 2004, 504-505). Likewise, giving to missions is minimal (505). Sutherland also indicates that many Black churches lean towards more liberal theology that is not motivated towards "global missions, particularly in the face of desperate needs in the Black community" (505-506). As recently as 2003, Sutherland reports that only 4 participants showed up to a seminar on recruiting African Americans at an evangelical missions conference attended by 140 participants; there were 3 other seminars offered in that same time slot (502).

In a more recent study, Linda Saunders interviewed 3 black pastors about global missions engagement. In relation to the idea that the Black church is focused on its own needs she summarized the pastors' perspectives by stating that "Every pastor agreed that the Black church is still in survival mode, trying to overcome centuries of

systematic injustices endured in the United States, which makes it nearly impossible to focus on global evangelization" (Saunders 2022, 139). This does not mean they do not care or are not interested in reaching the unreached. Saunders notes that "When a Black pastor thinks about unreached people groups, he or she imagines those who live in environmentally, socially, and economically impoverished communities who are forgotten by most churches—unfortunately most White churches" (Saunders, 140). In other words, Black churches do not focus on a global mission field, but endeavor to be "a missionary church to her own people" (Saunders, 141).

A further obstacle to engaging the Black church in global missions is the dynamic expressed by the Black pastors that "the modern missionary movement is still soaked with the stench of colonialism and imperialism" (Saunders, 143). Overall, the pastors are not opposed to global missions, and agree with the urgency to win the world for Christ, it is just that they are too focused on "surviving the realities of life in the United States" (Saunders, 147).

All of these factors present a challenge to engaging the Black Church more fully in Global and cross-cultural missions. Raven states that this would require changes in attitudes including "a clear understanding of the scriptural basis for capacity building, awareness programs, collaboration with others, and the support of the pastor" (Raven 2017, 176-177). This is possible, but it requires a complete and engaged process. Saunders, herself a missionary, has identified that the need stems from "a lack of teaching, discipleship, training, and education regarding local missions within the African American church" (2017, 193).

Another concern expressed by Black pastors is the lack of finances (Saunders 2017). However, Saunders (2017, 198) demonstrates that the problem may not be finances but a lack of priority in how funds are used. Perhaps, this is as much a problem in the United States church community as any one segment. U.S. giving to global missions has recently been estimated at merely 6 percent of total church budgets (Wright 2023, para. 4).

Hispanic Churches and Missions

Before it can be more fully engaged in mission, the Hispanic church in the U.S. has to deal with questions of its identity. This is largely along the lines of first and second-generation preferences.

Focus on Spanish language and cultural preservation

Within the Hispanic church in the U.S. there are two realities: immigrants who are primarily Spanish speaking and the majority of Hispanics who were born in the U.S. As of 2023 "68 percent [of all Hispanics in the U.S.] were native-born" (Migration Policy Institute 2023). Further, an earlier study from 2005 indicated that "61 percent of all native-born Latinos were English dominant, 3 percent bilingual, while only 4 percent indicated they were Spanish dominant" (Rodriguez 2010, 433). This creates a dilemma when it is recognized that "the overwhelming majority of Hispanic ministries in the U.S. rely almost exclusively on Spanish" (433). The result of this is that the larger majority of English speaking Hispanics may be outside of church ministries. This was reflected in a study that I carried out regarding language preference in worship. In a Hispanic church in upstate New York, while there were efforts at being bilingual, different youth reflected negative attitudes, particularly when the church expressed cultural aspects that were out of sync with the U.S. born Hispanics (Dean 2016). Further complicating reaching this group in general, is that English ministries are not connecting well with Hispanics, resulting in English dominant Hispanic youth feeling left out and often marginalized (Rodriguez 2010, 437).

Second, along with this language situation, for the majority of those who are Spanish-speaking immigrants, it appears that their objective in ministry is focused on "preserving their language and culture heritage" (Rodriguez 2010, 437). Various factors seem to shape this tendency including fears that English only services will lead to a loss of heritage, a loss of family connections, and open the door to decadence from the U. S. English speaking culture (Rodriguez 2010, 439). Thus, many Hispanic churches continue with Spanish or bilingual services which create their own set of problems, such as the younger bilingual generation struggling to focus on the intent of a sermon as they debate in their heads about the accuracy of the live translation (Dean 2016). In summation, it appears that the overarching model of Hispanic ministry reflects "the preferences of the immigrant generation" (Rodriguez 2017, 216).

Hispanic missions is often to Back Home

In spite of being in a new place, Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. are able to "preserve the values, traditions, and language of their countries of origin" (Rodriguez 2017, 217). This in itself does not mean that the Hispanic church is ignoring outreach and transnational work. However, its first focus tends to be back to the immigrants' home country (Rodriguez 2017, 218). From here it looks to move into other Latin American

settings. These actions tend to reinforce maintaining culture and language, once again leaving the U.S. born generations outside of involvement in church and, thus, in missions. The challenge for the Hispanic church is to see that no nation is an embodiment of the Kingdom of God. Rather, we are always living as "a colony of resident aliens" (226). Doing this, the Hispanic church will more likely be able to teach kingdom values and hopefully missions (227).

Asian American Churches and Missions

Even though the Asian American Community is diverse, the Korean church is the main group of focus for missions engagement.

Korean Churches are missions focused

While Korean American churches share a commonality with Hispanic churches in that there are Korean immigrant churches in the U.S. and churches of U.S. born Koreans, one significant difference is that many of the Korean immigrants originated in globally-focused Protestant churches in Korea (Kim 2020). This group has strongly focused on outreach to other Korean immigrants from other religious backgrounds and have successfully started many churches in the U.S. As of 2018, it was reported that there was one Korean church "for every 323 Korean Americans" (Kim 2020, 175). The end result is that "70 percent of Korean Americans identify themselves religiously as Protestant" (175).

Likewise, the Korean American church has been able to focus on global missions, thus, continuing the "passion and practice of overseas missions from Korea" (Kim 2020, 176). Additionally, the reality they face as immigrants has "strengthened their calling to be faithful Christians, which extends to their missionary zeal for engagement in multicultural experiences and international missionary networks" (Kim 2020, 176). In contrast to the Black American experience of exclusion by mission agencies, mission organizations from Korea and the U.S. "have expected to work with Korean Americans" (176).

Second generation Koreans are more Asian American than Korean

The Korean American churches also face second generation challenges similar to the Hispanic churches. While it appears that more efforts have been made to bridge the language and cultural differences, many second-generation Koreans still leave the immigrant churches. Of the many who maintain faith, they either join with other Asian

Christians—and assume an Asian American identity against a Korean American identity—or start new independent second-generation Korean Churches. This leads to challenges with leadership and maintaining a focus on missions (Kim 2020, 178).

Korean and other Asian American Christians face their own set of unique cultural barriers to becoming involved in global missions. Broadly, these cover a variety of cultural factors including the high expectations of Asian parents on their children, to struggles with a loss of family connections, to asking for support from within a shame based and indirect culture (Narita 2018, 20). While some issues faced by Asian American missionaries are similar to Caucasian American missionaries, such as educating children, David Narita emphasizes that mobilizing Asian Americans needs to focus on what is unique to them as individuals rather than to the larger groups (22). As the statistics indicate, there does seem to be more openness among Korean and Asian Americans to engage in global missions.

Religious Reluctance: The Nones

While most of us are aware of the group who are described as "nones," people who are largely not in the church, they are a part of the phenomenon that impacts the future of Global Missions and the church in the West.

A growing group disconnected from the Church

As of January 2024, Pew Research indicates that the religiously unaffiliated group in the U.S., more commonly known as nones, accounts for 28 percent of the U.S. population. Of this group 17 percent are Atheist or Agnostic, the remaining 63 percent being self-labeled as Nothing in Particular. Interestingly, the research also shows that this group is less civically engaged (Pew Research Center 2024c).

While this group may seem like they are outside of the focus of this research, the Pew report indicates that "most 'nones' say they were raised in a religion, usually Christianity" (Pew Research Center 2024c). Furthermore, of this group 13 percent believe in God as described in the Bible and 56 percent in some higher power" (Pew Research Center 2024c). In essence this is a group that has moved out of the influence of the Church and outside of engagement in global missions. For this reason, they have also been called *dones* (Seversen 2019, 75). Interestingly, this group does not have to remain outside of the influence of the church. A proposal by Beth Seversen (2019) suggests that they can be reached again by the church, but through the process of

"belonging and behaving before believing" (92). In practicing this model, they are allowed to ask questions and participate in "enactments of the faith such as prayer, worship, Bible study, and church participation" before believing (92). Perhaps this needs to be explored in connecting with missions. While this may seem impossible, Pew research also indicates that among nones regarding religion "14% say it does more good than harm; 41% say religion does equal amounts of good and harm" (Pew Research Center 2024c). In other words, many still see good in religion.

Educational Debt

An often discussed barrier to young adults responding to a call to missions is educational debt. This is a difficult topic to parse out as it is complicated, but a few details help to show that it is an aspect that has to be addressed. One indicator that it can limit missions engagement is that "the average student takes about 16-19 years to get out from under debt" (Money 2024). And this is just for a bachelor degree, not considering that many missions candidates have further education. Figuring out how to engage young people with mounting educational debt, will continue to be a challenge that has to be addressed in order to call Gen Z to global engagement. Perhaps a movement towards encouraging young adults to engage in missions through their vocations is an answer to their debt. Promoting a pathway to missions akin to the early success of the Eastern Church lay merchants who were engaged in spreading Christianity along the Silk Road may be a viable option (Ott 2021, 51).

Conclusion

The goal of exploring this recruitment challenge is to sketch out a realistic understanding of the U.S. context in which the future of recruiting for global missions engagement will take place. Admittedly, there is much that is bleak. It would be easy to sit back and let missions engagement diminish within the U.S. Evangelical Church. This is what is likely to happen, if the Evangelical Church does not expand its understanding of its current context. If the church limits itself to the white status quo, the number of U.S. missionaries sent will likely continue to go down.

Along with the perceived negativity stemming from White colonialization that has to be addressed; other issues that have to be addressed include Gen Z's level of anxiety, wrapping missions in more wholistic terms, and self-critical terms that recognize the problems in the US church as well as global needs, and not ignoring our own back yard (Farrah 2024, 13). Rather than throwing their hands up in despair about Gen Z, Jolene

Erlacher and Katy White, in *Mobilizing Gen Z* (2022, 74)) are helpful in pointing out that there may not be an abundance of workers from this generation, but those who do stand up for Christ and engage in missions will be "the few who desire to follow Christ faithfully." They recognize that mobilizing will be different but can be done. More positively, there are also opportunities for growth, as long as the challenge of recruiting from among Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans is explored and accepted.

The challenge to keep the U.S. engaged in global missions is real. Unless the realities of our context are addressed, the global missions engagement in the U.S. church will likely continue to decrease.

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REVIEW: Missiology with Power: A Missing Dimension in Intercultural Ministry

By Charles H. Kraft

Vol 4:2 2024

REVIEWED BY
RYAN KLEJMENT-LAVIN

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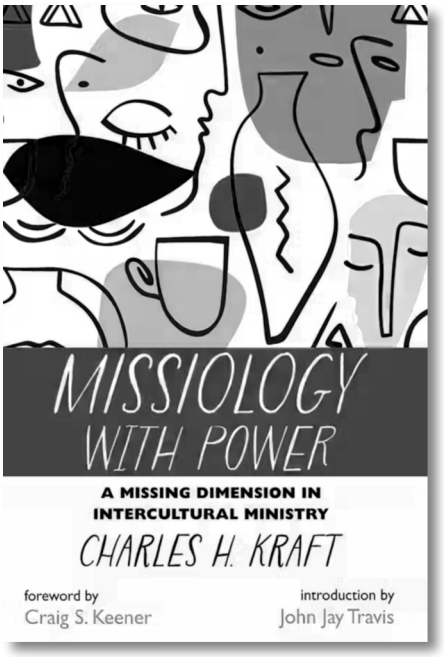


Charles Kraft has long been a name associated with the academic discipline of Missiology. His previous works have been seminal texts in the development of cross-cultural ministry in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Now, in his nineties, Kraft has published a new work, *Missiology with Power*, to pass along important lessons he has learned to current and future cross-cultural workers. The thesis of this book is that much of missiological training is deficient in its treatment of the realm of spiritual power. Rather than simply restating the concept of the Excluded Middle, which Kraft's contemporary Paul Hiebert posited, Kraft's points illuminate that the middle area continues to be excluded in missiological training.

This short book is broken into four main sections. In the first section, Kraft recounts his own journey as a missionary in Africa, and his beginning to experience the necessity of power in missions. In the next section, Kraft explains how animism, shamanism, and other folk religious practices are empowered by demonic forces to counterfeit God's power. Kraft gives a very clear distinction between animistic power and Christian power; while both may be real, the source of the power for the animist is ultimately Satan, while the source for the power of Christians comes from the Holy Spirit. The third section contains advice and guidance on how to pray for people who have been demonized through the occult or other practices aimed at gaining spiritual power. The

final section recommends actions for cross cultural workers on how to appropriately address spiritual power in communities, and ideas for contextualization.

The book is very readable and contains nuggets of wisdom to be gleaned by both the laity and the academy. While not absent, the lack of literature included and cited is perhaps less than what would be expected in an academic textbook. However, the seminal works in power encounter and missions are almost all included, firmly cementing the book in the literature. Additionally, the book relies on deliverance ministry literature for some specifics in understanding the nature of demonization. This book would be appropriate for a mature Christian leading a team or training through spiritual power issues in missiology. Some may bristle at the typology and terminology that Kraft develops and uses when discussing demons. However, much of the content is based off Kraft's own extensive deliverance ministry experience.

The final section of the book will certainly draw some controversy, specifically when Kraft discusses functional substitutes for traditional religious practices. For example, Kraft suggests that in cultural contexts where divination is common, those with the gift of prophecy may fill the role the diviners used to fill, except empowered by the Holy Spirit. The ever-looming question of syncretism looms large in the section, as it usually does when missionaries get real about what they have seen and experienced on the field.

While I do not agree with everything in the book, Kraft has revitalized an important conversation for missiology. Based on his experience, Kraft offers the next generation of cross-cultural ministers a launching point to discuss how to engage with the spiritual battle that is before us. The question that remains is how we will choose to engage or ignore the spiritual realm in missiology.

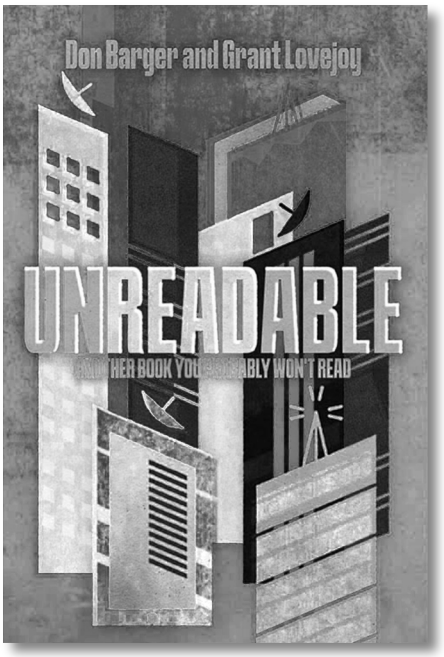
Ryan Klejment-Lavin

REVIEW: Unreadable: Another Book You Probably Won't Read
by Don Barger and Grant Lovejoy

Vol 4:2 2024

REVIEWED BY
ROSE WALIGORA

Barger, Don and Lovejoy, Grant, *Unreadable: Another Book You Probably Won't Read*. Richmond: International Mission Board. Pp 123, ISBN: 979-8-9881-1584-7 $17.99 paperback.



In contrast to their book title, *Unreadable*, Barger and Lovejoy have written a highly readable book that motivates one to want to read this book. Their catchy book title encapsulates their main thesis that people are increasingly less inclined to read print. The book is well-structured, with organized headings and page numbers, and written in a conversational tone that feels as if one was conversing with both authors over coffee. In addition, the authors cleverly provide QR codes that present the key points summarizing each of the 12 main chapters.

Barger and Lovejoy begin by stating that they initially did not want to write this book, which is based on their qualitative research on orality. They conducted 200 semi-structured interviews with the goal of understanding how people acquire information today and their preferred modes of obtaining knowledge. The participants for their research came from both rural and urban settings in all the continents except Antarctica.

As the reader moves through the book, Barger and Lovejoy present an overview of their research methods and then discuss a brief history of communication and the spread of information. This process initially relied on oral methods, later accelerated by the printing press, and has since shifted to electronic means. They also define orality

and how orality strategies are relevant for all communication efforts when people "value voice and visuals over print" (p. 17).

One of the strengths of *Unreadable* lies in the perspective that Barger and Lovejoy present due to their extensive experience as orality researchers and practitioners. In addition, their service as long-term missionaries overseas in this field enhance their perspective on orality ministry and digital technology. Their research is solid as they draw from more than 200 interviews, along with case studies and detailed testimonies that further illustrate their points regarding modern communication models. For example, the stories of Yasmin and Alex present real-life applications of non-print ways that people around the world access information.

The learning activities at the end of some of the chapters (chapters 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10) help the reader reflect and think through points of application. They also include practical suggestions for helping one to be more effective in understanding one's context, the listener, and how to craft one's communication in an increasingly digital age.

In today's world of information consumption through apps, sound bites and other non-print channels such as text messages, audio messages, podcasts, Snapchat, memes, and TikTok amongst others, *Unreadable* is significant in addressing various communication modes.

One of the main points the authors make, supported by their research, is the increasing shift in how people consume information and acquire knowledge from mainly print in the past to now through digital ways.

Unreadable is geared towards helping urban church leaders understand how the new generation acquires information and the most effective ways to communicate with them. However, the principles and information presented in this book also has relevance for people wanting to communicate effectively with the appropriate ways of transmitting information in today's social media-saturated contexts. I recommend this book for those seeking to understand how various audiences best receive and acquire information. When applied to those involved in sharing the Gospel to different peoples and in different contexts, these principles and best practices become especially crucial as the goal is transformation in beliefs and worldview. In conclusion, this is one book that readers will be highly motivated to read and recommend to others who desire to communicate effectively in this increasingly digital age.