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Is the Missions Textbook Doomed? The Use of Missions Related Texts in Spring 2024

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Abstract

Concerns about the costs of textbooks, and the neglect of their use, are driving university leaders to consider alternatives to traditional publishers. This study examined 315 coursebook requirements, representing 249 unique titles in 112 courses from 35 institutions. I compared the frequency of authors, titles and publishers to the available missiological books that have been published by nine major publishers. This comparison reveals which concepts are represented in the courses, and which concepts are not covered. The study also looks at the mean cost of textbooks per course and the mean age of texts, as well as the percentage of textbooks that are authored by the professor of the course, and the percentage authored by women, a person of color from the USA, or someone from a non-western country. The findings of this study are that the use of missiological textbooks remains strong. A broad scope of the available missiological literature was selected as required reading for courses in spring 2024, meaning there were no widely used texts or "celebrity authors." Despite the broad selection of readings, some themes of missiology—whether longstanding or emerging—were absent from the required reading.

Keywords: textbooks, missiology, evangelical publishing

A few years ago, I pitched an idea to a publisher of missions books. After politely declining my proposal, she asked me, "Why don't you research what books are currently being used in missions courses throughout the country? That would help us as publishers know what the market needs are." I immediately saw the usefulness of such a study for authors as well, because virtually all book proposals for academic presses ask such daunting questions as, *How is the book different from what is currently on the market? How is the book similar to what is on the market? What courses will the book be used in?*

How could an aspiring author of missions books answer such questions without first surveying the textbook use within missions courses throughout the country? Not only would authors and publishers find this information to be invaluable from a marketing and acquisition standpoint, professors would also be interested to know current trends as they adopt textbooks for their classes. And missiologists could analyze the topics, themes and theories in those course texts to understand the trends that are shaping the next generation of missionaries.

This article examines the required reading in missions courses that were used in spring 2024 across the USA, in order to answer the following questions:

1. How does the selection of authors and texts reflect (or fail to reflect) the "pool" of missiological scholarship that is available, and what does it indicate about current trends in missionary training?

2. How does the cost of missiological textbooks per course compare to national trends, and is there a significant difference in cost between graduate and undergraduate courses?

3. To what extent are professors adopting texts by women, US people of color, and non-Western authors?

Review of Literature

In order to analyze textbook use in missions courses, two concepts must be reviewed from the literature. First, what are current trends in textbook use across the USA? And second, how can a "benchmark" of the missiological corpus be established, in order to compare published works against the selection of texts in missions courses in spring 2024? Both of these topics are briefly discussed below.

The Changing Landscape of College Textbooks

Despite the fact that 90% of students feared they would suffer academically if they did not buy their textbooks, 63% of students skipped a textbook purchase in 2019— and this number went up to 65% in 2020 (Kim 2021). Many students still buy their textbooks, even if they do not use them. A 2018 study of 1065 students showed that the mean spending per semester on textbooks was $223.38 (Research and Markets 2018). This equals roughly $55 in textbooks per course.

Yet a convenience sample of 105 college students found that 52% did not read their assigned chapters (Aagard, Conner & Skidmore 2014: 136). In a qualitative study of 18 students, participants reported that they bought their textbooks in case they need them for reference, and were irritated if professors required a textbook without ever having them refer to it for an assignment (Aagard & Skidmore 2009). Neglecting to interact with reading materials within the class time is a widespread problem in universities. In a Florida study with more than 13,000 participants, students reported they bought an average of 2.6 required textbooks that were never required to be used in the courses (Office of Distance Learning 2022: 4).

Cleary, the usefulness of textbooks depends not only on the quality of the text, but on how the professor uses the text in class. For starters, students said they would at least skim the readings if their quizzes included questions that were only covered in the textbooks (Aagard & Skidmore 2009). But beyond that, students may need rich classroom discussions about how to critically interact with the course readings (Knight 2015).

Because college administrators are concerned about the cost of textbooks — especially the ones that go completely unread—some colleges are abandoning traditional textbooks for completely free open-source materials, saving students "as much as $1,300 a year" (Douglas-Gabriel 2016). One university is even paying professors $5000 stipends to write open educational resources (OERs) in lieu of requiring textbooks (Snyder 2019). As of 2022, 55.6% of US colleges students had access to an OER (Office of Distance Learning 2022: 7).

As I designed the current study, I wondered if the traditional missions textbook was destined to be replaced by such open-source materials. To what extent are professors still requiring students to purchase actual books?

The Curriculum for Missiology

I also wanted to know what qualifies as a "missiological text." The curriculum for missiology is not as stable as it is in certain other professional training programs like nursing or engineering. There is no accrediting body that determines the competencies or theories that students must learn, and no canon of literature has emerged. This lack of standardization makes it difficult to determine if a particular book is, in fact, missiological. When does a church growth book count as a missiology text? If a professor requires a secular text on microloans for a course on international community development, does that count as a missiological textbook?

Elsewhere I have noted that, being highly interdisciplinary, missiology draws on other fields like communication theory, agriculture, the study of world religions, ecumenism, and community development (Nehrbass 2016: 56-57). Several schools that outlined a missiological curriculum drew on biblical studies, history of missions, engagement with other cultures, spiritual maturity, resilience, inner healing, evangelism, and provision of healthcare (Nehrbass, Dunaetz, & Jow 2024). Despite its ever-widening reach, the field of missiology does have some soft boundaries, delineated by the goal of making disciples across cultures.

> In missiology, the space where these multiple disciplines converge is the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission. Without that specific convergence, there would be social sciences, history, ethnotheology, etc., but there would be no missiology. Missiology exists when the study of God and the world is employed for the purpose of making disciples across cultures. (Nehrbass 2021: 30)

Of course, missiology is shaped by popular trends that come and go. Some, like "contextualization" have a longer "half-life" than others — (e.g., the church growth movement) (Nehrbass 2014). This current study looks at the textbook use in spring 2024 to answer which ideas have had a sufficiently long tail life that they capture the interest of professors and students. And are there any new subjects emerging that show up on the reading list for 2024?

The Texts Available for a Missiological Curriculum

This breadth of missiological curriculum is being published by nine main Christian presses; yet, as mentioned above, at times it can be difficult to determine if a book belongs in the category of missions/missiology. It is a realistic judgment that all 300 titles from William Carey Publishing (WCP) are on missions. The imprints of Wipf and Stock do not have a category called "missions," but an analysis of their listings published in the last ten years includes over 350 books related to making disciples across cultures (note this is the criteria described above, for determining whether a book falls under the rubric of missiology).[1] Like Wipf and Stock, Orbis does not have a subcategory of missions, but an analysis of their catalog reveals roughly 120 books related to the history of missions, global Christianity and cross-cultural ministry. Eerdmans has 54 titles in their missions category (20 published in the last ten years) and Intervarsity Press (IVP) Academic lists 167. Of 9,856 books published by the imprints of

[1] This count excludes books that are useful in missions courses but that are not specifically about missions, such as community development (in general), or outreach (in general).

Baker Books (this includes Baker Academic, Bethany, Revell and Brazos), 121 are in their intercultural studies or missions category (30 have been published in the last five years). Zondervan is a much smaller player in the missiological space, and does not have a subcategory for missions books. Of 2,084 titles, only 19 are directly related to making disciples across cultures. Langham Academic has roughly 94 titles related to missions or contextual theology in English. And Crossway has 41 titles in the missions and evangelism category. In all, there are just over 1100 missions-related options for textbooks available from these eight major publishers alone. A pool of 1100 potential textbooks seems manageable enough to wade through. For this study, I wanted to know, *what percentage of these books are actually being used in courses?*

Method

I used two non-probabilistic approaches to compile a list of textbooks that were required for missions courses in spring of 2024 in the USA. First, I assembled a list of universities and seminaries that offer degrees in intercultural studies, global studies, or missions. In many cases, those universities have public-facing online bookstores; so I was able to select the spring 2024 missions-related courses on those websites, and the required texts appeared in my virtual "cart."

However, universities that use an online textbook service called Slingshot often require a valid student ID to query the textbooks and course offerings. In these cases, I reached out to professors and asked for a list of their missions coursebooks for spring 2024.

Ultimately, I collected 315 entries, representing 249 unique textbooks in 113 courses (39% graduate level) from 35 seminaries and universities. Below is an analysis of the textbooks they selected for those classes.

Limitations

In order to bracket my own bias as an evangelical, I used the Lightcast research service to identify eligible conciliar and evangelical[2] universities and seminaries in the USA. Delimiting the study to only "missions", "intercultural studies" and "global studies" programs may have elided mainline schools. Additionally, because this study relied on convenience sampling, I found it easier to leverage my strong ties with evangelical professors, and found it more difficult to leverage my weaker ties with professors at conciliar or mainline schools.

[2] Seventh Day Adventist universities were excluded.

Findings

First, it is encouraging to see how many universities are offering missions courses, given that the BA degree in missions has experienced a 35% decline since 2018, the BA in intercultural studies (ICS) has experienced a 26% decline and graduate degrees in missions have experienced a 30% decline in the same period.[3]

And it is encouraging that the missions textbook is not dead. There was not a single course in spring 2024 that abstained from the use of textbooks. The findings of this study are that a broad selection of the available missiological literature was selected as required reading for courses in spring 2024. There are no widely-used texts or "celebrity authors." Despite the broad selection of readings, some themes of missiology—whether longstanding or emerging—were absent from the required reading.

The cost and age of the textbooks

The mean age of coursebooks was 11.4 years (SD = 7.7), with a wide range of publication dates from 1978 (Kane 1978) to 2024. There was no statistically significant difference between the age of course books used in graduate courses (with a mean age of 11.6 years, SD=6.8) or undergraduate courses (with a mean age of 11.4 years, SD=9.2).

The mean cost of textbooks per course was $68.67 with a wide range from $11 to $323.76 (SD=$49.15). With a mean price of $26.27 (SD=$16.12) per text, students are buying between 2 and 3 missions texts per course. Because graduate courses have a longer reading list, there was a statistically significant difference in the cost of undergraduate courses compared to graduate ones — $48.95 compared to $100.24 respectively, $t(65) = 5.6$, $p < .001$.

The texts being used

There is no textbook that is broadly used in missions curricula. The text with the largest influence is *Perspectives* (Winter & Hawthorne 2009) with a frequency of 6 in the sample. Table 1 on the next page shows all titles that appeared in three or more courses of the study sample in spring 2024.

[3] This information comes from the Lightcast reports, based on reporting to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Graduate degrees in intercultural studies have experienced a 5% growth since 2018. The Lightcast report includes some public institutions that offer intercultural studies or global studies degrees.

Table 1: Most frequently used missions textbooks spring 2024

Title	Frequency	% of market share in college courses
Perspectives On The World Christian Movement 4th Ed. (Winter & Hawthorne 2009)	6	5%
From Jerusalem To Iran Jaya (Tucker 2004)	5	4%
Introducing World Missions (Moreau, Corwin & McGee 2015)	5	4%
Invitation To World Missions (Tennent 2010)	5	4%
Effective Intercultural Communication (Moreau, Campbell & Greener 2014)	4	3.5%
Mission Of God (Wright,2006)	4	3.5%
Cross Cultural Connections (Elmer 2002)	3	2.7%
Cross Cultural Servanthood (Elmer 2006)	3	2.7%
Holistic Mission: God's Plan For God's People (Woolnough 2010)	3	2.7%
Introducing Christian Mission Today (Goheen 2014)	3	2.7%
The Celtic Way Of Evangelism (Hunter 2011)	3	2.7%
Transforming Mission (Bosch 1991)	3	2.7%

Given that across the USA there were 539 "completions"[4] of BA degrees in missions and ICS combined, and 507 graduate degrees in missions and ICS combined, a textbook that has 5% market share will be used by only 52 students of missions, annually[5]. Yet if, as noted above, only 50% of students even purchase their textbook, the highest achievable annual sales *as a required textbook* is more likely to be about 26 copies.[6]

Of course, students who are majoring in other disciplines are also taking these missions-related courses; so, if they are also buying the required textbooks for these courses (and if these missions-related textbooks are being used in non-missions courses, such as introductory ministry courses) the sales will be higher — perhaps significantly higher. This would mean that the missions textbook — as a textbook for students of missions — will have slim sales; but books that are meant for wider audiences may fare better.

[4] This is the term that the Lightcast report uses for graduating students.
[5] Of course, these courses may have higher enrollments if they include students from other majors; and textbooks have other avenues for sales, beyond the classroom.
[6] These low numbers seem credible to those of us who receive annual sales reports from our missions book publishers.

The Heterogeneity in Textbook Selection

The section above referenced a pool of 1100 textbooks available through the nine major publishers of books on missions. In this sample of courses from Spring 2024, 166 (15%) of the books in that corpus of missions books from those nine publishers were adopted for use. The other 57 texts in the sample for this study were released by other Christian publishers like Moody and B&H; and 26 titles in this study were published by secular presses.

In other words, one in eight (15%) of the missions texts published by the "big nine" were actually used in the missions course sample in spring 2024. These seem like good odds: a professor has a one-in-eight chance of having his or her book adopted into the curriculum. But another way to look at this is that the broad selection of texts means that the corpus is spread very thin. While the canon of missiological textbooks may have been fairly standardized in the 1990s — drawing on "celebrity missiologists" like Charles Kraft, Sherwood Lingenfelter, Paul Hiebert, and Lamin Sanneh— there is not the same degree of homogenization today. One in eight missiological titles is adopted in any given semester.

This raises the question, is the corpus spread so thin because every professor is using his or her own book? The data from this sample show that only 4.8% of coursebooks are authored by the professor, so this cannot be the reason for such heterogeneity in coursebook selection. Instead, the lack of "celebrity texts" seems to be due to the fact that missiology is such an unstandardized discipline, and draws from an increasingly broad number of fields.

One reason for the lack of a "celebrity text" may be the large pool of texts to draw from. Every year, more missions textbooks are published, so the pool keeps expanding. It is much larger than it was in 1980, or 1990. So *choice* has replaced hegemony of a few "celebrity" texts.

The Authors in Missions Course Textbook Selection

While there was great heterogeneity in textbook selection, there are eleven authors who appeared in five or more courses across the USA in spring 2024 as highlighted in the following table.

Table 2: Authors who appeared as author, co-author or editor in five or more courses in spring 2024

Author	Titles	# of Courses Represented	Market Share of Courses
Moreau, A. Scott	• *Contextualizing the Faith* • *Effective Intercultural Communication* • *Introducing World Missions*	10	9%
Smither, Ed	• *Christian mission* • *Mission as Hospitality* • *Mission in the Early Church* • *Augustine as Mentor* • *Missionary Monks* • *Mission in Praise, Word, and Deed*	8	7%
Wright, Christopher	• *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* • *The Mission of God's People*	8	7%
Tennent, Timothy	• *Invitation to world missions* • *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable*	8	7%
Elmer, Duane	• *The Learning Cycle* • *Cross-cultural conflict* • *Cross-Cultural Connections* • *Cross-Cultural Servanthood*	7	6%
Ott, Craig	• *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures* • *Mission of the Church* • *Encountering Theology of Mission* • *Global Church Planting*	6	5%
Winter, Ralph & Hawthorne, Steven	• *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*	6	5%
Goheen, Michael	• *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* • *Introducing Christian Mission Today* • *Reading the Bible Missionally*	5	4%
Steffen, Tom	• *The Return of Oral Hermeneutics* • *Encountering Missionary Life and Work*	5	4%
Tucker, Ruth	• *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*	5	4%

It does appear that one key to being a frequently-used-author is to have multiple titles available. All of these authors are prolific, and the above selection of texts is just a portion of the books published by those eleven authors.

Note that only one of the eleven "frequent authors" (or editors) above is a woman, and all are white; all but one is still alive.[7] Only 3% of courses had a coursebook by at least one author who is a US person of color, and 7% had at least one author from a non-western country.

[7] However, *Perspectives* has contributions from women and people of color.

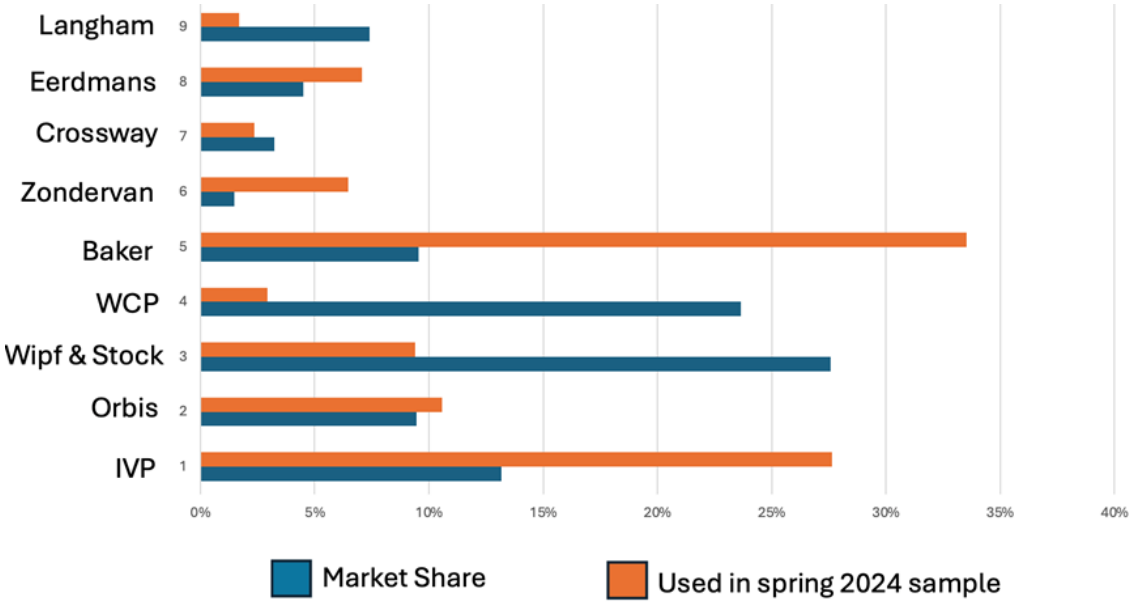
The lack of diversity among the authors who are selected for missions textbooks is notable, but likely represents the level of diversity within the available missiological corpus in English (excluding Langham, which represents majority world authors). Among the required textbooks, 14% had at least one female author, whereas 22% of texts published with WCP have a female author, compared to 17% of missions books with Eerdmans, 13% with IVP Academic, 9% with Baker and 7% with Crossway. It is much more difficult to determine the percentage of books within the missiological corpus that are authored by a US person of color or a person who is from a non-western country.

The Representation of Missions Publishers in Textbook Selection

Figure 1 on the next page shows that some publishers are over-represented while others are under-represented in missions courses. Zondervan has only a 1% percent of market share of published missions books, but has 6.5% of market share in the sample of missions courses, and Baker has 10% of missions books but has a 33% share of the required course texts in the sample. On the other hand, WCP has 24% market share of published missions books, but only 3% share of the books used in missions courses. Likewise, Wipf and Stock's imprints have a 30% market share of missions textbooks but only have 9.5% of the share in required courses, and Langham has 7% of available missions textbooks but only 1.5% use in the spring 2024 sample. This mismatch in representation may be largely due to budgets available for marketing. Langham and Wipf and Stock and WCP have far fewer resources for marketing than Baker and Zondervan have. The mismatch may also be related to sentiment about publishers' rigor. However, Langham, WCP and Wipf and Stock have published a trove of valuable missiological resources, including the monographs for the Evangelical Missiological Society (none of which were used in this sample of 2024 missions courses). Lastly, publishers like Baker and Zondervan may be better-equipped to produce courses that can be adopted by professors — i.e., ones that can be integrated into Blackboard or Canvas, and that include heuristic devices.

Figure 1:

Market share of mission books, compared to share in the missions courses



Heterogeneity of Topics

While authors of textbooks may be encouraged that one in eight missions texts "out there" ends up in a missions course, this means that seven out of eight are not being adopted for courses. One reason is that much of the published missiological scholarship — in an effort to be specialized enough to make a significant contribution— is too narrow for use in a classroom. For example, Shakwelele's (2023) study of ancestor veneration among the Bisa people and Wood's (2023) study of male leadership in Mongolia both contribute to the field of ethnotheology, but may be too specialized for use in a course on contextualization. Additionally, many useful biographies are being produced, but may be too obscure for wide appeal in the classroom, such as the recent biographies of Armenian relief worker Penelope Prior (Clifford 2024), or Assemblies of God missionary Noel Perkin (McKnight 2024).

To determine which topics were discussed (and elided) in the sample of courses in spring 2024, I read all of the textbook descriptions and then used initial and thematic codes to place the textbooks into categories (Bingham 2023). The following table shows the frequency of topics that did show up in the missions courses in spring 2024.

Table 3: Frequency of topics in the sample of missiology textbooks spring 2024

Topic	Frequency
Theology Of Missions	42
Intercultural Communication	27
Global Christianity, Contextualization	26
History Of Missions	24
Development, Holistic Mission	17
Evangelism, Discipleship	16
Diaspora, Migration, Refugees	15
World Religions	13
Missiology, Intro	13
Missiology, Comprehensive	13
Church Planting	7
Anthropology For Missionaries	6
Cross-Cultural Leadership	6
Intercultural Education	5
Missionary Life	5
Women In Missions	5
Islam	4
Missionary Biography	4
Racial Reconciliation	4
Urban Mission	3
Spiritual Warfare	3
Orality	3
Mobilization	2
Member Care	2

This list of themes is fairly comprehensive, and reflects the broad survey of missiological literature that has recently been produced (Nehrbass 2021: 282). Yet it also misses some of the current themes in the literature. For example, recently missiologists have taken interest in digital ministry (Robertson 2023). Additionally, longstanding missionary methods like theological field education (Trist 2023) and medical missions (Lee 2021) are also not represented in the courses even though scholarship is being published on these topics. There was apparently no focus on language learning in missions (Dormer 2021), persecution of Christians (Ripken 2014),

or ministering in honor-shame cultures (Georges & Baker 2016). And missionary strategies like peacebuilding (Anyanwu 2022; Scott, et al. 2021), chaplaincy (Linzy & Travis 2022), the arts (Balasundaram 2021; Gillard 2022; Whittaker 2021), as well as Bible translation and teaching English as a second language (Nehrbass 2021: 229-278) were also missing among topics in the sample from spring 2024.

Implications

This survey of textbook use in missiology brings to light several implications for practice:

- Make yourself aware of books from under-represented missions publishers like Langham, Wipf and Stock and William Carey Publishing.
- Reflect on how your coursebook selection can better reflect the diversity of authors within the missiological corpus.
- Be intentional about designing your book to be textbook-friendly. It should have bite-sized chapters, and should have heuristic devices like callouts, internet links, study questions, and activities.
- Be aware of topics that are currently being published in missiology, to see if these topics need to appear in the course content (e.g., peacebuilding, the arts, digital ministry).
- Consider whether your course's textbook requirements align with national trends regarding cost.
- Reflect on the way your course's learning activities and assessments compel students to not only read the texts, but interact critically with them.

Conclusion

Despite apparent troubles in the college textbook industry, published books continue to be a core learning activity for missions courses, and the cost per course is in line with national trends. There are no "celebrity texts" due to breadth of fields from which missions courses draw. The major topics reflect traditional missiological training, such as the theology of missions, global Christianity, and missiological anthropology. Islam, community development, urban missions and diaspora missions are still trending in the courses. Despite this broad interdisciplinarity, about eight in nine books by the major eight publishers of missions books are not represented in the mandatory reading.

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Key Words: *Resurrection of Jesus; secularization; missional theology; evangelism*

Abstract

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is profoundly the cornerstone of the Christian faith. However, its missiological implications have widely been ignored by the average churchgoer. While many will attest to the resurrection as an integral part of one's salvation, applying the resurrection to mission efforts has, unfortunately, been lacking. Secularism has been on the increase in Europe for some time and has now rapidly begun to influence even one of the most churched areas in the United States presenting new challenges for mission and evangelism. With secularism's pretense for science and historical facts, utilizing the established historical evidence for the resurrection as a missiological springboard affords even the average churchgoer a common epistemological ground for which to engage an increasingly secularized world with the gospel. This article briefly examines the established historical evidence for the resurrection and illustrates how these evidences can be used missiologically in evangelistic outreach efforts as well as illustrate the power of the resurrection in more holistic mission endeavors.

The Established Historical Evidences for the Resurrection

The historicity of the resurrection has been well established by scholars such as Gary Habermas, William Lane Craig, N. T. Wright, and Michael Licona. Their work has had a profound impact on the topic of the resurrection for both apologetics and mission. Habermas, in particular, outlines what he calls the minimal facts of the resurrection. These minimal facts are "so strongly attested historically that they are granted by nearly every scholar who studies the subject, even the rather skeptical ones" (Habermas and Licona 2004, 44) and they provide the necessary epistemological framework for which to engage our increasing secularized world. The practice of historiography

demonstrates the historian's process for concluding whether certain facts or events did or did not in fact occur in history. Habermas summarizes this process as follows:

> After the historian gathers his materials, organizes them, and applies external and internal criticism, he is ready to prepare and formulate his conclusions. The results should conform to all the known data and provide the most comprehensive and probable judgment on the issues. The outcome is then open to careful scrutiny from other scholars, which should prompt the cautious historian to be able to defend the results, based on the factual data available (Habermas 1996, 197).

Because the study of the relevant data concerning the resurrection is attained through historiographical means, such historical data and conclusions can be used to engage a skeptical and secular world that holds science in high regard.

Many skeptics and philosophers through the ages have denounced the use of historiographical means to study or attest to events that are miraculous. Scholars such as David Hume, C. Behan McCullagh, John P. Meier, and Bart Ehrman made this objection (Licona 2010, 135-189). Michael Licona's analysis of these objections thoroughly refutes them to where he concludes, "There are no sound reasons, a priori or posteriori, for prohibiting historians from investigating a miracle-claim" (Licona 2010, 189). As such, utilizing historiographical techniques to study and draw historical conclusions from the evidence for the resurrection is not only possible, but a sound means of engaging with secular individuals and discussing the facts of the resurrection. The historical evidence for the resurrection can allow for dialogue to commence that can lead to evangelistic encounters with the truth of Christianity. More information on historiographical criteria and utilizing this method in evangelism will be addressed momentarily.

Habermas has compiled an impressive amount of data concerning the facts for the historicity of the resurrection. Among this data is a list of facts that attest to the historicity of the event. These include: Jesus died by crucifixion; He was buried; Jesus's death caused the disciples to despair and lose hope, believing that His life was ended; the tomb was empty; the disciples had experiences which they believed were literal appearances of the risen Jesus; the disciples were transformed from doubters to bold proclaimers of His death and resurrection; the message of the death and resurrection was the central message of the early church; the message was proclaimed in Jerusalem; the church was born and grew as a result of this proclamation; Sunday became the

primary day of worship; James, Jesus's brother who was a skeptic, was converted; and Paul was converted (Habermas 1996, 112).

With the exception of the empty tomb, these facts hold nearly unanimous acceptance among critical scholars. Such a list of twelve facts is impressive and valuable for a wider discussion on the topic, however limited in its usage for practical mission and evangelistic encounters. Because of this, Habermas and Licona pared down the list to four minimal facts plus the empty tomb. These five minimal facts are: Jesus died by crucifixion; Jesus's disciples believed he rose from the dead and appeared to them; the church persecutor Paul was changed; Jesus's skeptic brother James was converted; and the tomb was empty (Habermas and Licona 2004, 48-78). From Habermas's list above, William Lane Craig argues for the use of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances of Jesus, and the origin of the Christian faith (Craig 2010, 277) in his analysis of the historicity of the resurrection event. Whether one attests to or utilizes three, five, or all twelve of these facts the issue is certain—the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact and holds great missiological implications especially now in an age of increased secularism.

These historical evidences are found primarily among early Christian creeds and the writings of the church fathers. The earliest of these creeds is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. This creed is very early and "recognized by virtually all critical scholars across a very wide theological spectrum" (Habermas 1996, 109). In fact, Habermas (1996) states, "It is very popular to date this creed in the mid AD 30s. More specifically, numerous critical theologians date it from three to eight years after Jesus' crucifixion" (p. 110). For historical events, eyewitness data from a date of three to eight years from the event itself is very early and credible. An early report significantly reduces fabrication or legendary elements from creeping into the authentic account of the event. The evidences originated from a variety of sources both Christian and non-Christian. The biblical accounts from the Apostle Paul, the Gospels, and even sources that pre-date the New Testament literature, such as oral creeds, provide the most abundant evidence. Writings from the early apostolic church fathers such as Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius, and others also attest to the eyewitness accounts. Other than Christian sources, there are historical sources from non-Christians as well. Among these are the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, the Jewish historian Josephus, Lucian of Samosata, Mara Bar-Serapion, Thallus, Pliny the Younger, and the Jewish Talmud. These sources attest to Jesus's death and the subsequent growth of the early church (Licona 2010; Habermas 1996). The historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is well attested and allows for missiological engagement through the power of the historical resurrection.

Utilizing the Evidences Missiologically in Evangelism

With the rising population of religious *nones* throughout the United States and even in areas of the country where evangelical Christianity still holds widespread acceptance, missiological engagement of these increasingly secular and irreligious *nones* is more important than ever. Evangelistic outreach must be taken more seriously in order to stave off the growth of the irreligious *nones*. These areas, including the North Texas area, contain many evangelical churches that proclaim the gospel and seek to see people come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. However, their success or lack thereof, is evidenced by the trend of rising irreligious *nones*. Evangelism is clearly lacking among the average evangelical churchgoer or merely being relegated to professional ministers. If the trend of secularism and the rising of the *nones* is ever to be turned, then evangelistic outreach must increase. Utilizing the historical fact of the resurrection as an apologetic means to begin conversations provides even the average evangelical churchgoer with the tools necessary to engage an increasingly secular world.

Habermas and Licona proposed twelve ways in which believers, armed with the historical evidences for Jesus's resurrection, can engage people with the truth of these evidences (Habermas and Licona 2004, 191-204). Among these ways, two stand out as especially important. First, they suggested staying on the subject of Jesus's resurrection (Habermas and Licona 2004, 194). Many times, whenever a discussion turns toward the topic of Jesus, the person tries to turn the conversation to secondary issues or raise other objections. Often this occurs due to conviction from the Spirit or simply possessing an argumentative attitude. Habermas and Licona (2004) demonstrated that, "If you elect to switch course in the discussion and now go with the [secondary issue or other objection], you may be treading on ground on which you are not as familiar and, most importantly, you move away from your central subject. Stay on the subject of Jesus' resurrection" (195). This is critical because the goal is not to engage in discussion on every topic related to God or Christianity, but to present the evidence for Jesus's resurrection and bring the person to repentance and faith. Following red herrings distracts from the task of utilizing the historical evidences in a positive and meaningful way. One must tread carefully when engaging with either secular skeptics or irreligious *nones* and remain on topic to allow for strong missiological engagement.

The second way that is important that Habermas and Licona (2004) gave is resisting the temptation to overstate one's case (202). While the evidences for Jesus's resurrection are compelling and convincing, believers must be careful not to present the evidences arrogantly. For example, it would be unwise to state, "I can prove to you beyond all doubt that Jesus rose historically from the dead." Such a claim is dangerous

for the average churchgoer to say in evangelistic encounters much less the seasoned missiologist to a hardened skeptic. Habermas and Licona (2004) noted, "Virtually nothing can be proved with that degree of certainty" (202). Even attorneys when trying court cases seek to prove the innocence or guilt beyond a reasonable doubt and not beyond all doubt. When presenting the evidence for the historical resurrection, the task of the believer is to present the weight of the evidence that proves the event beyond a reasonable doubt. This does not mean that the secular skeptic or irreligious *none* will not have any doubts or further questions, but their doubts should be lessened to the point of acceptance of the relevant historical data. Rather than claiming that one can prove the resurrection beyond all doubt, the average churchgoer could claim that they could present strong historical evidence for the resurrection and refrain from making any absolutist claims of proof that could present difficulties. Approaching the task in this manner affords the believer the opportunity to present the evidence and even debunk opposing theories that the skeptic may pose (cf. Craig 2010, 308-324).

Sharing the historical evidence for the resurrection with average "secular" irreligious *nones* who typically possesses little knowledge of any historical evidences for the resurrection or any opposing naturalistic theories, is a relatively easier task than sharing with the secular skeptic who holds science in high regard over any miracle claims and perhaps has previously studied the topic. In order to effectively respond to the secular skeptic, a more historiographical approach is warranted. Many of these secular skeptics hold to the scientific method as the only means of accurately verifying scientific claims and hold to Hume's argument regarding miracles. The problem with this premise is that firstly, the scientific method is limited in its usefulness even in other sciences such as archaeology, paleontology, or geology due to their inherent ability to recreate or observe findings in these disciplines. History falls within this category as well as events in history are unobservable or able to be experimented upon. Secondly, philosophers have illustrated that Hume, in his argument against miracles, oversteps his bounds by a priori dismissing the possibility of miracles. Habermas concluded, "It would appear, then, that the Humean backdrop for rejecting miracles must be discarded (Habermas 2003, 13). Historiography demonstrates the historian's means of scientific inquiry and provides a missiological tool to sharing the historical evidences for the resurrection.

In order for an event to be deemed historically accurate, it must meet five historiographical criteria: explanatory scope, explanatory power, plausibility, less ad hoc, and illumination (Licona 2010, 109-111). Of all of the various alternative theories including the hallucination hypothesis, swoon theory, conspiracy theory, and displaced body theory, only the resurrection hypothesis which states that Jesus historically rose

from the dead, meets all of these five criteria. When utilizing the evidences of the empty tomb, the postmortem appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith (the evidences Craig utilizes), the resurrection has great explanatory scope. It properly accounts for each of these evidences. It also has great explanatory power by explaining why the body was gone, and why people saw Jesus alive despite his death. The resurrection hypothesis is plausible. Craig stated, "Given the historical context of Jesus' own unparalleled life and claims, the resurrection serves as divine confirmation of those radical claims" (Copan and Tacelli 2000, 37). The evidence for the resurrection is also less ad hoc than these competing hypotheses. For instance, when analyzing the hallucination hypothesis, it fails the less ad hoc criteria because "it posits many psychological conditions in so many different people, in friend and in foe, in different situations, within individuals and groups, and all without an ounce of solid evidence" (Licona 2010, 518). Many ad hoc constructions must be made in order to create a tenable explanation utilizing this hypothesis. The resurrection evidence does not and is much less ad hoc. Finally, the resurrection hypothesis possesses illumination. Licona (2010) stated, "A hypothesis fulfills this criterion when it provides a possible solution to other problems while not confusing other areas held with confidence" (605). Fulfilling this criterion illustrates that other issues such as the early Christian's devotion to Jesus can be explained through the resurrection event.

Utilizing a historiographical approach when explaining the evidence of the resurrection to secular skeptics provides scientific ground on which missiological engagement can occur. The historical evidences of the resurrection provide a strong epistemological tool that even the average evangelical churchgoer can employ when engaging in mission especially among "secular" irreligious *nones*. An example of this can be seen in Paul's message in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13. He concluded his message with a call to repentance and faith following a declaration of the historical resurrection of Jesus. Habermas noted that this "formed the heart of the message [and]...was the basis of Paul's plea for his hearers to seek the forgiveness of sins and exercise faith in Jesus for salvation" (Habermas 2003, xi). Therefore, in evangelistic encounters, presenting the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is a powerful apologetic/evangelistic tool that the Christian can utilize. While no apologetic tool can, in and of itself, can cause any type of conversion (that is the work of the Holy Spirit), it does allow for conversations to begin and for new avenues to be pursued that even the most skeptical secularist may not have even considered.

Power of the Resurrection in Holistic Mission Efforts

Another major aspect of the missiological implications of the resurrection of Jesus other than utilizing the historical evidence in evangelistic encounters is that the resurrection provides a deeper understanding of the historical fact of Jesus's command to make disciples and engage in mission. If, according to the historical evidence, Jesus rose from the dead in space and time, then His command to make disciples, be witnesses, and proclaim the gospel to all nations must also be taken historically and given in space and time. As such, the command to be on mission continues to apply to all believers that claim the name of Jesus. In baptism, we identify with His death and subsequent resurrection. This public identification with Jesus not only identifies us with His death and resurrection, but with His mission as well. The resurrection event compels even the most average churchgoer to missiological engagement. N. T. Wright (2008) observed:

> The mission of the church is nothing more or less than the outworking, in the power of the Spirit, of Jesus's bodily resurrection and thus the anticipation of the time when God will fill the earth with his glory, transform the old heavens and earth into the new, and raise his children from the dead to populate and rule over the redeemed world he has made (264-265).

While the ultimate goal of mission is to bring people into a saving faith with Jesus Christ and the worship of the one true God through evangelistic engagement, holistic mission efforts provide a means of connecting with an increasingly secular world.

Much has been debated over the years regarding the priority of evangelism versus a more holistic approach as the thrust of mission (cf. Little 2016, 27). While such a discussion and debate is outside of the scope of this paper, the historicity of the resurrection empowers mission and provides the essential foundation for both evangelism and holistic mission efforts. John Stott argued that the relationship between evangelism and social action is best described as a partnership. He stated, "Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself. Both are expressions of unfeigned love. Evangelism and compassionate service belong together in the mission of God" (Stott and Wright 2015, 27). With the rise of secularism among millennials and Generation Z, holistic efforts, especially service-based approaches, can be a vital component in engaging the secular world. Stott came to the same conclusion stating, "Jesus Christ calls all his disciples to 'ministry,' that is, to service. He himself is the Servant par excellence, and he calls us to be servants too.

This much then is certain: if we are Christians, we must spend our lives in the service of God and others" (Stott and Wright 2015, 31). Stott's point is poignant and condemning given the pervasive rise of secular *nones*, especially in regions of the country where many evangelical churches exist and profess to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Millennials and Generation Z, who make up the largest portion of secular irreligious *nones* in America, possess a great desire to want to serve their communities and leave their mark on the world. David Stark (2016) noted, "There is a service revolution happening in our culture today with the younger generations that provides a great bridge to outsiders around us" (p. 143). Engaging in service opportunities in the community demonstrates the kingdom of God and takes seriously Jesus's command to love one another (John 13:34-35). Stark (2016) further stated, "Outsiders want to see the kingdom and gospel in action before they discuss the words and truth claims of Jesus" (p. 152) including any historical truth claims regarding the resurrection. The old adage, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care," is especially relevant in utilizing holistic service options for missiological engagement. By showing secular *nones* that they are loved and cared for through service opportunities and care ministries such as hospital visits or providing care for underprivileged families, believers then gain the evangelistic opportunity to share the evidences for the resurrection of Jesus and lead them closer to repentance and faith.

Further holistic efforts such as caring for the poor, bereavement ministries for those grieving, and ministering to those who are suffering at the hands of political oppressors all find their empowerment in the historical resurrection event. Habermas (2003) stated:

> In the New Testament, even practicing the Christian life, in such ways as preaching and ministering to the grieving, followed from Jesus's resurrection. Assurance of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, living victoriously, as well as one's commitment to both the Lord and the poor, are related to this truth. Even the final victory over suffering and evil, our future hope, finds its ultimate meaning in Jesus's victory over the grave (p. xii).

It is evident that the resurrection event of history continues to grant the believer the power to not simply live the Christian life or hold to a hope for a future resurrection, but also grants the privilege of engaging a lost and dying secular world with the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit further attests to not only the significance of the resurrection in the lives of believers but instills that resurrection power inside to demonstrate the love of Jesus to an increasingly secular world. The

ministry of the Holy Spirit is directly corollary to the resurrection event. Jesus promised the coming of the Spirit following His resurrection (cf. John 14-16). Through the evidence for the resurrection, believers can have hope that the resurrection event actually happened and that the Holy Spirit does indeed indwell them to live the Christian life, serve their neighbors, and engage in mission.

The lack of missiological engagement by average evangelical churchgoers speaks to the rise of the secular *nones* and to a growth of secular thought. A lack of service-oriented outreach in lieu of a church-centered focus has led to an exodus from evangelical churches from those who would, at best, be classified as moderately religious. A research study by Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock (2017) found that "The rise of the unaffiliated [or secular *nones*] is due solely to a dramatic decline of the moderately religious. As a larger proportion of the population disaffiliates, a larger share of the remaining religionists identify [sic] as more intensely religious" (p. 689). So, while the rise of the unaffiliated is due to the moderately religious withdrawing from the church, the remaining portion, who is the more intensely religious and most likely true believers, must be engaged in serving their community in an effort to not only proclaim the gospel message, but to demonstrate the gospel message by living out the command to make disciples and love one another. This holistic approach with service at the fore empowered by the historical resurrection grants evangelical believers the means, method, and power to engage their secular world particularly among the moderately religious. This demographic, that at minimum has at least some religious background, would tend to be the most receptive to a service-based approach accompanied by sharing the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. This missiological engagement, however, can only be accomplished through the group of intensely religious fully understanding the missiological implications of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus and its power in their lives. Without such an understanding, missiological engagement will continue to decline and secular *nones* will continue to rise even in areas of the country where a strong evangelical base is present.

Conclusion

The evidences for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus holds considerable historiographical weight. The explanatory scope, explanatory power, plausibility, ad hoc-ness, and illumination of the resurrection evidence far outweighs any competing naturalistic theory or explanation of the event. As such, the historicity of the resurrection and its missiological implications demonstrate that every born-again believer must be on mission especially in light of an increasingly secular world. The lack

of missiological engagement by even the most average evangelical churchgoer attests to this fact and to the subsequent withdraw of the nominally/moderately religious. The evidences for the resurrection provide a powerful means of engaging with this secular world and places the engagement not solely on theological grounds, but on a historiographical one as well. This strategy allows for a common epistemological ground between the believer and either the secular skeptic or secular *none* on which to engage. Evangelistic proclamation utilizing the evidence for the historical resurrection can lead even the most average evangelical to share the truth of the gospel. Further holistic efforts such as serving the community in various ministries allows for the power of the resurrection to be illustrated by the believer to a lost and dying world. Taking seriously the command to love one another as Jesus has spoken, the believer utilizes the resurrection power within and can engage people more effectively with the gospel. Fully understanding the missiological implications of the historicity of the resurrection affords the believer with the means, method, and power to engage an increasingly secularized world.

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Systematic or Narrative?
The Role of Story in Shaping the Social Imaginary of Millennials and Generation Z

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The church in the Western World has not only seen decline in church attendance, but also a shift in long held moral stances. Within the same congregation, there is often disagreement between generations on issues such as same sex attraction or abortion. Culture in the West has clearly shifted, but what accounts for this change within religious institutions, even within evangelical Christianity? This article interacts with the concept of the social imaginary as presented by Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age,* and how explores how story has helped lead to this shift we have seen. Recent generations such as Millennials and Gen Z have particularly been shaped by the changing meta-narrative of modern American culture. The article concludes that as story has played a central role in shaping thought processes and moral standpoints, so story should be used to reshape worldview under the biblical narrative. The article demonstrates how the Church can utilize story in the realms of evangelism, apologetics, and moral formation. In addition to utilizing story, the Church should also teach young people critical thinking skills so that they may be able to process the stories which they are receiving from culture at large.

Keywords: *Millennial, Generation Z, Moral Formation, Apologetics, Evangelism*

Introduction

The Christian Church in the West (Europe and North America) finds itself in a precarious state. The last few decades have brought a cultural shift which has left the church reeling. The effects are easy to see within the statistics. Looking primarily at Generation Z, Twenge reports that Church attendance declined slowly until around 1997 and then plummeted (2017,147). A third of young adults within the United States do not affiliate with any religion (2017,145). Yet even after 1997 as people were skipping

out on attending church, many still believed in God and prayed. However, even that has changed. Twenge writes

> In 2004, 84% of young adults prayed at least sometimes, but by 2016 more than one out of four said they "never" prayed. Fewer young people believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God; by 2016, one out of four instead thought it was "an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men". Thus, it is no longer true that Americans are just as religious privately. More and more Americans, especially Millennials and iGen'ers (Gen Z), are less religious both publicly and privately (2017, 152).

However, this shift does not simply consist of people leaving the church or abandoning faith in God. The church, and culture at large, has also seen a shift within the social imagination towards certain long-held cultural and moral institutions.

One such example is same sex attraction. The cultural view of homosexuality has shifted significantly in the last three decades within western nations. While Christians (especially evangelical Christians) in general do tend to hold a more traditional understanding of sexuality and marriage than their non-religious peers, views among younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) have been changing. David Kinnaman writes in his book, *You Lost Me*, "Christian or not, younger adults tend to be more accepting of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals than older adults" (2011,162). Caryle Murphy states, "Roughly half (51%) of evangelical Protestants in the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) say homosexuality should be accepted by society, compared with a third of evangelical Baby Boomers and a fifth of evangelicals in the Silent generation" (2015). Generational differences with similar patterns were seen across other denominations and faiths as well. Regarding the generational shift in views towards homosexuality, Twenge states, "These are some of the largest and most rapid generational and time-period differences in existence" (2017, 274).

In his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor shares the story of how western nations went from a state of enchantment, where it was almost impossible not to believe in God (or gods), to the state we currently live in where it is quite natural, and for many the default option, to believe in the absence of a creator (2007,14). In presenting his story, Taylor combats the subtraction theory which implies that secular humanism is the natural outcome of scientific and evolutionary progression. Within his story a combination of philosophical, theological, political, as well as technological shifts led

to an age of secularity, which, while including atheism, is characterized more by a sort of "Nova Effect" with an explosion of varying belief systems characterized by self-fragilization as numerous views seek to coexist but inevitably collide (Taylor 2007,299). If the church wishes to be successful in making disciples, it must learn how to successfully communicate within this secular age.

A vital form of communication and moral formation, which in many ways the western church has overlooked and undervalued, is story. Storytelling has been used for generations in cultures across the world to pass down important aspects of society (Vitz 1990). Within this article I will first seek to look at Taylor's concept of the Social Imaginary as it is important to the way people perceive themselves and the world around them. I will then look at the importance of story and show ways that stories have impacted the secularization of young people in the west. I will conclude by addressing what this means for Christian apologetics and faith formation.

Social Imaginary

Within the term social imaginary, Taylor seeks to evoke something deeper and broader than the way people may actively think about social reality in a disengaged mode. It is the way in which people imagine their social existence and how they fit together with others. The social imaginary includes the expectations we have and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations (Taylor 2007,171). Summarizing Taylor's concept, John O'Neill writes, "The imaginary is essentially a commonly shared moral conception of the ideal society" (2016).

The concept of the social imaginary is important, because it is how we perceive (imagine) the world around us as individuals, but also as a collective. The social imaginary is not just abstract theories from academia or political elites, but rather, the common popular understanding of what is right and worth striving for (O'Neill 2016). Within the age of secularization, we have seen people of different walks of life and different religions come together and live within the same land as relative equals. What this also has led to is a core of shared beliefs to allow for general human flourishing. However, there have been subsets of issues which remain to be contested by differing groups within this society. Therefore, we see an overarching social imaginary which predominantly dominates a land (or even our world) at a moment, but within that are still the imaginaries of different groups and individuals. O'Neill writes, "The conception of the social imaginary enables analysis of the dominant moral purpose and moral order of a society in terms of private (or familial) and public (or systemic) economic agency" (2016).

At one point in history Christian thought was the primary driver of the social imaginary in the west. However, this no longer remains the case. The "Nova Effect" has led to an explosion of beliefs, and with it an ever-increasing number of ideas contributing towards the concept of what is morally good and acceptable. At the same time there has arisen an "Immanent Frame,"[1] which traps modern society within the immanent, not needing the transcendent in everyday life. Evangelical Christians have often stood at odds within modern western secular society on certain moral issues, such as same sex marriage and abortion. The concept of the social imaginary is important because we see the way that values of secular society have influenced evangelical Christianity through the power of story. The way many younger generations of Christians imagine modern society to function and what is moral, differ from older generations within the church, despite the fact that in many churches the teaching on these issues has not shifted. These facts lead to a logical and important question: what has caused such a shift in the imaginary of these different generations? The social imaginary has been shaped by, and is continuing to be shaped by, that which has shaped imagination since man began communicating: story.

The Importance of Story

Story is vitally important. Without story our world would be a much blander place, and we would have lost so much of who we are. The very act of storytelling is a part of the human experience (Hunter & Eder 2010, 223), and stretches back to the very origin of language and the mind (Tolkien 1947, 8). Stories are not just a western enigma but are present in every culture throughout time. Western culture is oversaturated with stories. Noble writes, "Our stories are more pervasive, more diverse, and more immersive than ever. What these stories give us are ways of imagining meaning and justification in life" (Noble 2018,76). Within this section I hope to highlight three areas in which story plays a vital role.

Within Development of the Individual

Stories are vital to the development of a child. Hunter and Eder write, "Through the use of stories, young children make sense of the world surrounding them" (2010,223). Story can help educate imagination and feeling and contributes to intellectual as well as emotional development (Mowl 1972,19).

[1] Taylor coins the term the Immanent Frame to explain the state of our secular world. The frame has been composed of the understanding of science vs. God, the narration of subtraction, modern understanding of ethics and the understanding of the autonomous self in authorizing values and morals. From Taylor's analysis we live entirely in a context and social imaginary that needs no reference to the transcendent. We may live in a closed frame (not acknowledging the existence of transcendence), or an open frame (open to the spiritual), but either way our society is formed by this frame (2007:545).

Narrative has shown to be important as it conveys truth to our brains in a different way than analytic abstract thought (Stratton 2021,60). In many ways people, especially children, think in images. Abstract ideas are almost impossible to grasp apart from association to some form of a metaphoric image (Starr 2018). What does it mean to be nice? To help a person understand what we desire by them being "nice," one might share a story about a person going throughout his or her day, sharing with others, allowing others to go first, and encouraging others. The narrative allows us to stop simply talking about a moral life and instead give real examples (Vitz 1990,718). Brett Sanders writes, "Stories are the most powerful way to learn anything, or remember it, because they rub with the deepest grain of our nature. One of the most important things children gain from stories is moral formation" (Saunders 2018,59). Paul Vitz, in his argument for the use of stories within education, after summarizing many psychologists works regarding narrative communication writes, "a very effective way to introduce children to the moral life, short of actually placing them in morally challenging situations, is to have them hear, read, or watch morally challenging narratives" (1990,716).

In Shaping Society and Culture

One should not underestimate the power of a good story. Stories have been one of the primary ways throughout human history through which cultures have passed down their history and their values to future generations. The stories we share show the current values of a society and shape the culture further. Quoting Michael Margolis, Susan Stratton writes, "If you want to learn about a culture, listen to the stories. If you want to change a culture, change the stories" (2021,57). In his paper *Storytelling within the Context of Apologetics*, which is culled from his book *Doing Apologetics with an African Mindset*, Ebenezer Afolabi shares three functions of storytelling: mediating and transmitting of knowledge and information across generations, conveying information to the younger generation about the culture, worldviews, morals, expectations, norms, and values, and supporting and reinforcing the basic doctrines of a communal participatory experience (Afolabi 2022,2).

The values and morals of a society will impact all aspects of life. If a core value is family and respecting elders, then this will greatly impact family structure and housing. If a core value is success at all costs, with little emphasis put on truth or honesty, then one should not be surprised at cases of embezzlement. Stories have a way of showing what a culture values and conveying those values to future generations. Yes, stories have an entertainment factor, but even that which entertains educates. Even play for children is not simply entertainment, rather children learn through play.

Forming the Future

Stories help form the future in many ways. First off, the values which we pass on help form not just the society of today, but of the future as well. Stories were passed down from generation to generation, not just to record history, but also to help maintain those elements of society worth keeping.

Stories have also been integral in leading towards social change. They have often done this by shedding light on atrocities which the larger part of a culture either didn't see or overlooked. For instance, slave narratives were used by abolitionists to help end the North Atlantic Slave Trade. The novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was also written shortly before the American Civil War to help create support for Abolitionism. Harper Lee's book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has also been cited as factoring in the success of the Civil Rights movement.

Another way in which stories impact the future is by helping us to imagine what could be. Science fiction narratives have often portrayed technology not yet present in the time of writing. Such fanciful ideas have then driven technology forward to reach such ideas (Jordan et al. 2018,1).

Conclusion

Story is vital to who we are as human beings. Stories help us as individuals, working to instill morals and imagination, they help form society, and they influence the future. This shows that narratives which gain traction and have a wider audience are important. What we consume as individuals has the potential to influence us, our concept of what is morally good and acceptable, as well as what our values should consist of and what constitutes human flourishing. Furthermore, what is consumed by the larger society as a whole, can thus impact the social imaginary.

The Role of Story in the Secularization of Young People in the West

The last section showed the importance and influence of story. Yet the way in which story has been presented and consumed has greatly evolved throughout time. Before written language there was oral tradition. The invention of the printing press revolutionized the ability of the masses to consume literature. The advent of the radio allowed for audio narrations to be heard by masses at the same time. And then came video and television. Today young people hardly read unless required to for school and primarily consume story through electronic media (Twenge 2017,75). Nevertheless, story is woven throughout all aspects of media as well as life in general and continues

to impact the social imaginary. Even businesses are interested in the power of storytelling (Fryer 2003). This section will seek to look at three forms of stories which have influenced and are continuing to impact younger generations, namely: story in the form of historical narratives, story through media (written as well as digital), and conclude by addressing personal stories, often referred to as testimonies.

Story Presented Through Historical Narratives

Throughout the course of civilization story has been integral to passing down history from one generation to the next. However, in the past this was mostly controlled by elites and a formal system, whether through religious educational systems such as the church or secular educational systems. The advent of the internet has drastically changed the distribution of information and has thus had an impact on known history. New technologies and websites such as Wikipedia have allowed for a shift away from traditional top-down narratives and the surge in "counter narratives" or "history from below"(Waterhouse 2016:6)(Mora 2014:1)[2] (Waterhouse 2016,6). The average person has access to a myriad of competing narratives with regard to historical events, such as the stolen generation in Australia (Waterhouse 2016) or the Tulsa race massacre in the United States (Wikipedia contributors 2025c). Such counter narratives have shown younger generations that there are sides to history which have often been hidden. This has naturally caused younger generations to be wary of traditional historical narratives presented by organized institutions, whether it be a nation or religious institution. Twenge states, "The percentage of 12th graders who say that institutions such as education, government, the news media, large corporations, and religious organizations are doing a good job reached an all-time low in 2014" (2017,334). Digital sources have become a main source for news with 54% of adults reporting at least getting some news from social media, primarily from Facebook or YouTube (Pew Research Center 2024). This trend increases in younger generations, showing that from the age range of 18-29, 86% prefer to get their news from digital media.

This movement feeds into the Nova Effect coined by Taylor, in that it allows for a range of views on any particular subject or historical event to be given. This has led to terms such as misinformation and malinformation to become prevalent. Teens and young adults are often learning narratives to history which are counter to that of what their parents and grandparents know. These narratives may or may not be true. Regardless of validity, this well of narratives works not only to erode trust, but also

[2] "The concept of 'history from below' is the demand for the stories of subjugated and oppressed peoples to be told, and the rewriting of official histories to include their experiences" . "'Counter-narrative' refers to the narratives that arise from the vantage point of those who have been historically marginalized" .

enables people to search for articles, videos, and various media to support their stance on any given issue. Many teens are also receiving access to a wide range of information without consent or knowledge of their guardians as many older generations are simply uneducated and unaware of how to limit internet access for minors. Many older generations are also unaware of what narratives are presented on social media sites such as YouTube and TikTok.

Story in Media

> Movies and television fueled the entertainment industry. They were, and are, critical components in forming the modern understanding of the self. They must feature in any narrative that seeks to explain how and why the ideas of the intellectual elite come to shape the social imaginary as a whole (Trueman in Hansen 2017,20).

Today young people may be reading fewer books (Twenge 2017,75), but that does not mean that they are not being bombarded with story. To the contrary, younger generations spend a vast amount of time with new media, spending about two hours a day on the internet, one and a half hours a day on electronic gaming, and about two hours a day watching TV (Twenge 2017,64). The social media explosion has led to the growth in short term narrative content across platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

Videogames must not be overlooked when it comes to narrative impact. Many videogames provide a unique narrative experience in that they allow the player to guide the story by making their own choices which will impact the development of their character and outcome of the story. This puts the player into simulated moral issues in ways that other narratives don't because they actively participate in the story and the choice. Even games that do not provide this sort of choice still deliver rich narratives full of moral, psychological, and philosophical issues.

These statistics are vital for the church to grapple with and to understand because media control the flow of ideas and information across the globe (Sivasubramanian 2019,1). The Swedish sociologist Mia Lövheim already wrote in 2012, "Among younger generations, the media is a more frequent arena than family and church for encounters with religious ideas and values" (2012,164). Media has become an active culture agent of all forms of communication (Sivasubramanian 2019,1). Margunn Dahle writes

> Consciously or subconsciously, children and youth find answers to many of their lifestyle, ethical and existential questions in the media messages. These media images and stories give an impression of what is important

> in life, how to live, whom to trust, what to believe in, and what to think about themselves (Dahle 2017,62–63).

Young people's use of media has continued to rise with the continued growth of high-speed internet and social media platforms. Even chat rooms and social media sites are filled with narrative stories that conflict those of traditional faith values as young people are able to interact with people from all over the world, with all sorts of values and moral frameworks.

Story from Personal Experience (Testimonies)

Christians have long understood the importance of personal testimony when it comes to sharing the gospel. The Christian does not simply profess a belief in the resurrected Christ, but demonstrates a change and new life through Christ (Penner 2013,101). However, Christians are not the only ones with a story to share. Ever increasing amounts of communities are coming together to share their stories with one another, and the world around them. Therapists and educators have begun seeing the importance of a person sharing his or her story.

In her paper, *Morality Work Among the Transabled*, Jenny Davis examined the process by which stigmatized persons resist moral denigration by utilizing a process of discursive remoralization techniques. She coined the term *morality work* (2014,436). Her research tracked blog-posts and social media sites of transabled individuals (or BIID). Transabled are individuals who feel some sort of sexual attraction to people with a disability, desire to have a disability themselves, or even pretend or seek to become disabled (Davis 2014,435). Her work showed that in sharing their feelings and stories among one another, this community created techniques of overcoming the moral stigma surrounding their condition and actually succeeded in "taking the moral high ground".

Over the last few centuries, the Western world has come to view authenticity as a sacred moral value. Taylor has coined this the "age of authenticity" (2007,475). Therefore, to live a "good", "righteous", and "fulfilling" life means being true to oneself. Davis writes

> This discourse of authenticity renders claims of sexual perversion irrelevant; turns the greedy use of resources into the essential use of tools for self-fulfillment; reworks the need for attention into a need for self-verification; and justifies lying as a necessary evil in the sacred quest for an authentic and fulfilling life. (2014,445–446)

The process of *morality work* requires a process of "frame lifting and frame shifting" as well as skillful navigation of cultural repertoires (2014,447). Through the process of frame lifting and frame shifting, those who would originally be seen as morally deviant or in a stigmatized group attempt to shift their status by sharing their personal stories. Through this process they show that this is their authentic self and re-work frames of certain structures around them. In the case of transabled individuals it varied based upon the case (whether the person acted disabled or was simply attracted to disabled individuals) but throughout the process of their morality work they reworked the frames of health and illness, as they favor mental well-being over physical dexterity (2014,448). In navigating cultural repertoires, we see communities shift their dialogue to help fit in and become accepted within culture. Through her research Davis found that at the beginning of one blog site there was frequent discussion of sexual activity with regards to BIID, but this began to shift. Many have found cultural acceptance by re-imagining their identities not as a mental disability which should be treated, but a marginalized group of people. What is interesting is that both detractors and supporters can have different bents on the same moral issues. Whereas detractors see them as "sick" and "in need of help", transabled individuals saw this as a signifier of blamelessness, one that shifts their stigmatization out of the moral realm (2014,450). In the conclusion of her work, Davis writes

> By appealing to the value of inner-truth, abnormal embodiment becomes not only acceptable, but a righteous pursuit. With this logic, those who stand in the way of such a pursuit become the object of moral derision (2014,451).

Sarah Combellick took the concept of morality work and authored a paper in connection with women sharing abortion stories online. Many pro-abortion sites have begun sharing such stories to help encourage women who are standing before an abortion decision. The stories showed a wide range of stances, from individuals who saw no moral problem with their decision to abort, to those who wrestled with the decision, but felt like it was overall the best decision to make. Within her research she noticed that some women even wove their faith into their personal accounts. Combellick notes that these women can be seen as holding two seemingly contradicting ideas at once while maintaining a coherent narrative (2023,99).

Everyone has a story to share. And these accounts show us the power of personal testimony, especially when shared within a contained group. Personal testimonies become all the more powerful the closer we are to a person. We are much more concerned about the life of a close friend or dear relative than about a stranger. Yet, the

rise of the internet has allowed virtual strangers to build deep friendships without ever meeting face to face. The stories we consume can either help push us towards God and his truth, or towards our own truth and self-justification.

A Christian Response

If the church wishes to be effective not only in apologetics and evangelism, but successful in moral formation of the next generation, it must evaluate the role of story within its theological approach to such things. As has been shown, storytelling is central to society, and it must have a place within the church as well. This section will seek to first look at ways of implementing story into theology in terms of apologetics and evangelism as well as moral formation. It will then briefly discuss the concept of a Christian influence in media. In conclusion, it will look at teaching critical thinking and analysis skills so that when young people encounter media, they are prepared to reflect on what messages are being conveyed.

More than Systematic Theology

As previously noted, in his book A Secular Age Taylor shares his story on how mankind went from a state of enchantment to disenchantment. Taylor identifies four significant shifts in world history that led to the anthropocentric secularization of culture. These shifts occurred from the collective repercussions of the Reformation, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and the Scientific revolutions (Stratton 2021,9), which contributed to the creation of a "buffered self"[3] and a systematic approach towards looking at God and the universe. During this timeframe there was a shift in western thinking towards more abstract thought and to favor logical, scientific reasoning. As social imaginaries began to emerge which drifted from traditional church understanding as to the nature of God, even leading to the possibility of atheism, many theologians began to defend the faith and apologetics, as we often know it today, emerged (Penner 2013,6). Myron Bradley Penner writes in his book *The End of Apologetics*,

> In order to fend off modern attacks and establish itself as a legitimate branch of knowledge, modern theology focuses on articulating the contours of the Christian worldview in a coherent system that establishes Christan doctrine as a rational body of knowledge (2013,45).

[3] The concept of the buffered self is that the possibility exists of taking distance from and disengaging from everything outside the mind. It is the concept that people are capable of influencing and changing their own situations, outcomes and destinies.

One problem is that in defending the faith, or moral faith positions, many Christians still rely on "time proven" arguments with language formed from a different time. Penner states that "many attempts to articulate the reasonableness of Christian faith in our context paradoxically end up doing something different than defending genuine Christianity" (2013,6).

Another problem is that Christians seek to reason logically about the possibility of faith, or the reason for certain moral positions, while the surrounding culture is full of counter narratives. Every day the average person is bombarded with stories which reflect the absence of God, a grounding for moral truth, and contrast the values put forth by the church. Good theology must consist of good story or the church will continue to see decline.

Story in Evangelism and Apologetics

In his book *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and imagination in a Disenchanted World,* Paul Gould appeals to the need for cultural apologetics which he defines as, "the work of establishing the Christian voice, conscience, and imagination within a culture so that Christianity is seen as true and satisfying (2019,21). While traditional apologists focus on academic sources for providing evidence for arguments, cultural apologists seek "cultural artifacts" in illustrations taken from the world of art, music sports, entertainment, social relations, and politics (Gould 2019,20). Cultural apologetics seeks to demonstrate not only the truth of Christianity, but also the desirability of Christianity (Gould 2019,25).

This form of apologetics calls for "double listening," a Christian mind that's "shaped by truths of historic, biblical Christianity and also fully immersed in the realities of the contemporary world" (Wax 2023). This form of double listening is complemented by a "double refusal" of refusing to escape from the world, and a refusal to conform to the world (Wax 2023). If we want to effectively defend the faith and share the Gospel, then we must thoroughly understand that which we are sharing, and those with whom we are sharing.

As we reflect on the three forms of story (historical, media, and testimony), combined they have the ability to impact the social imaginary of the world around us and help people escape the immanent frame (Noble 2018,155). Story through media can help introduce a person to the concept of a creator and the concept of more than just human flourishing. Cultural Apologists can use references to books, movies, & songs to awaken within hearts the desire for the Gospel.

The historical narrative of early Christianity tells a compelling story all on its own, as many apologists have already realized. The stories of the first apostles giving, traveling the distances which they traveled, and even offering their very lives for the sake of the gospel is fascinating. However, we must be careful not to just present these as simple facts in some sort of argument, but in a compelling way!

Testimony is an important aspect in evangelism. Churches should champion personal testimonies and allow people to share what God has done for them. These testimonies need not always be about radical transformation, but even those who grew up within the church have a story to tell. As Christian witnesses we should also not just give narrative testimony to the truth we have received in Christ by telling our stories, but also embody that testimony in how we live (Penner 2013,101). The way we interact with the world, and the way we serve others is a living testimony to the power of Christ in us. Penner summarizes this concept thusly, "With my words I engage my listeners with a narrative so that they can imagine a world with this particular truth, and by my life I show them it is possible to live in that world" (2013,102). In sharing stories the church should try to focus much more on who and what they are for rather than what they oppose (Kinnaman & Lyons 2012,26). The Gospel is life changing, and we must show that it is a change worth making. A shift towards a positive, better life, not towards the negative.

Story in Christian Discipleship and Moral Formation

Story can help awaken people to the existence of God, but story is an often-overlooked aspect of theology with regards to discipleship and moral formation. Betsy Childs Howard writes, "we'll be far more effective at reaching children's minds and hearts if we intentionally shape their moral imaginations through good stories" (2020). The shaping of the moral imagination does not stop in childhood. As we have seen, stories help shape the social imagination of today as well as the future.

Often moral formation within the church is approached systematically. A sermon will have three points on the danger of such and such an issue. Battling moral issues such as pornography is often done using statistics and facts showing the dangers of pornography. And when it comes to homosexuality, within many evangelical churches, often a list of verses is given as proof texts and little more to address the issue. I am not trying to say that these are illegitimate. We should utilize logic, and the Bible should be our ultimate authority, but we should also learn from the Bible in seeing how it often used stories to address difficult issues. Utilizing story to address difficult moral issues can, as shown earlier, help people to understand abstract concepts better. It can help a

person understand the consequences of a particular action but as well as to understand the positives of a particular choice.

When it comes to the subject of why there is pain in the world, the Bible told a heartbreaking story of a man named Job who lost everything. Yes, the book of Job contains many philosophical diatribes, but contained within a story. Jesus often packed his truths within story. Stories can help us show how life should be, and what we as a church stand for. Stories can help show what a healthy marriage looks like. Stories can also show the dangers of something like pornography addiction. Instead of just saying that something is wrong and giving a few proof texts, a story of someone actually caught in addiction is compelling and illustrates the point.

Testimonies are a powerful form of story when it comes to dealing with moral formation. Allow people to share their stories. In recent years many same sex attracted Christians have written books about their experience such as *Washed and Waiting* by Sam Hill and *A War of Loves* by David Bennett. Such experiences can be a great resource when dealing with such a sensitive and important topic. As Christians we should listen to one another's stories and learn from them.

Christian Influence in Media

The average church only has a limited number of hours a week to form minds and hearts, while those same minds and hearts are being formed all week long through various sorts of media. David Sivasubramanian writes, "theology cannot afford to shun from media because of its culture determining role in the contemporary world" (2019,4).

Christians should seek to contribute to story through various forms of media. This does not simply mean the creation of Christian media, rather, Christian creatives should be encouraged to use their talents to influence media within the secular realm. We are capable of showing an alternative social imaginary, one that can help open the closed immanent frame, by validating and revealing truths hidden in their hearts (Nobe in Hansen 2017,144). Concerning the need to impact the arts Alan Noble writes "To pursue this approach, we need foundational investment in Christian liberal arts universities, creative writing and film programs, literary publications and more (2017,144). We need compelling, well told stories which reflect values worth pursuing and which can point people towards God. This is not a call for every church or every minister to be active on YouTube, but for churches to support those who have proper gifting, and for churches to be willing to invest in those individuals and projects to help have an impact.

Church leaders should also be aware of good media which they can use, or which they can tell others about. Since teens spend so much time on new media, then it can be significant giving them good media to consume.

Critical Thinking and Analysis

Christian moral formation through story does not imply retreat from all forms of non-Christian media, but rather sees how good stories help us see and pursue God stories (Saunders 2018,66). Young people are impacted by the stories they are hearing and seeing. The church needs to not just impact their lives with positive stories but also help them to understand how media impacts them and teach them to think critically and interpret the stories which they consume. Alan Noble states, "As participants in culture, all Christians are interpreters , and the framework Taylor provides can help us to more accurately and insightfully interpret art" (2017,138). Brian Godawa calls Christians to allow movies to challenge them, and even change them, by helping them to see the world through different eyes. He writes, "By entering into the story, we can experience a part of human existence and truth that we cannot reduce to abstract ideas or philosophy" (2009,176).

We must teach teens how to effectively engage and interpret media. A usable process is a two-step methodology which begins by decrypting. As a person consumes media, he or she can look for what is good, true, and beautiful (fragments) within stories, as well as what is ugly, wrong, or perverted (idols) (Anzenberger 2024). This helps us see fragments of the true biblical story, and ways in which it has been perverted. Fragments draw the spectator into the story, whereas idols have the power to imprison the spectator within the worldview of the story. The second step consists of re-encoding. Within this step we ask what sort of worldview is presented, with its values, philosophies, and morals. And the spectator asks how he or she should respond (Anzenberger 2024). This methodology helps a person to see redeemable aspects of stories and what type of philosophies and values undergird the narrative, helping a person to evaluate what is worth keeping and what he or she should discard. In our digital internet age, with its flood of information, it is also important to help young people learn how to sift through numerous narratives to discern what is true and what is not.

Conclusion

Christians are currently living in a secular age. Over the last fifty years churches have been feeling the tension of this growing secularism as they have seen church attendance decline and a shift in values. Secular stories have contributed to the shaping of the social imaginary and have led to this current state. If the church wants to be effective in engaging people with the gospel, and passing along values to the next generation, then it must understand the importance of utilizing story. We do not need an abandonment of systematic theology, rather, we need a fuller theology that understands the vital importance of story to helping us understand complex abstract concepts. Stories have filled imaginations for generations, and they have the potential to play a crucial role in shaping the social imaginary in our current age to bring people closer to God.

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Abstract

This contextual theological study addresses the gap in Asian-American discipleship by employing a contextual theological approach, focusing on integrating Asian cultural traits with scriptural principles. Utilizing insights from Bryan S.K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Peggy H. Yang, the study examines key cultural traits including collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, family recognition through achievement, filial piety, and cultural humility in contrast with American values. By proposing a framework of Christian marginality, the article aims to provide a foundational model for effective Asian American discipleship. This approach seeks to enhance the development of culturally relevant discipleship strategies within the field of Asian American ministries in the context that embraces all Asian Americans from various ethnic heritages.

Key Words: *Asian American Discipleship, Ministry Strategy, Spiritual Formation, Contextualized Framework, Asian Cultural Traits*

Introduction

Discipleship in the 21st century faces significant challenges. John Stott observed that the church's growth in the latter half of the 20th century, continuing into the 21st century, has often been "growth without depth," marked by insufficient advancement in discipleship (Stott, quoted in Steer 2009, 267). Despite numerous analyses and strategies, there remains a notable lack of focus on Asian American discipleship, a gap that is glaringly evident in the theological research landscape. For instance, the Theological Research Exchange Network (TREN) contains only 13 theses or dissertations addressing Asian Americans, none of which specifically focus on discipleship, despite a catalog of over 18,511 theological papers from 151 institutions (TREN 2024; U.S. Census Bureau 2016). This gap is particularly concerning given the

Asian American population in the U.S., which the U.S. Census Bureau estimated at 21 million in 2015, projected to double by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau 2016).

This article addresses the need for a robust, scriptural discipleship framework tailored to Asian American contexts. Utilizing the six common Asian cultural traits identified by Bryan S.K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Peggy H. Yang—collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, family recognition through achievement, filial piety, and cultural humility—this article explores the cultural tensions between these traits and their American counterparts (Kim et al. 1999, 342-352). It proposes the concept of Christian marginality as a solution, integrating these competing cultural poles to form a foundational framework for Asian American discipleship.

Definition of Key Terms

Asian: Individuals originating from the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.[1]

Asian American: An American citizen of Asian descent.

Christian Marginality: The scriptural integration of conflicting cultural values through theologizing (Wan and Raibley 2022, 89-90).

Discipleship: The process of glorifying God by living under the authority of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in fellowship with His people, aiming to become like Christ and help others do the same (Wilkins 1997, 12).

Framework: A theoretical systematic structure which serves as a foundation for theoretical and practical refinement and elaboration in formulation and implementation of various techniques, strategies, conjectures, evaluation, and assessments.

[1] This definition was taken and used from the U.S. Census Bureau: U.S. Census Bureau, "*About*" (July 2013),l http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.htm.

Christian Marginality From the Six Asian Cultural Traits with Their Competing American Cultural Traits

As highlighted by Jane M. Bennett in *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, failure of forming Christian marginality from the Asian culture and the American culture is characterized by disintegration in shifting cultures, loose boundary control, difficulty in decision making, alienation, self-absorption, no recognized reference group, troubled by ambiguity, etc. (Bannett 1994, 113). This section in this article will focus on the six cultural traits that are commonly found for being an Asian along their American counter cultural traits, and provide a scriptural foundation in how to formulate Christian marginality for each of the trait pairs (categories). While this article does not aim to address foundations for each of the six categories extensively, it aims to provide scriptural backbones for each which further delineation and Christian marginality can be elaborated and extended. This would be reasonable given the limitations of the page numbers in this article. Nonetheless, such provision would be enough to facilitate and fabricate further work in each of the respective areas for Asian American discipleship as a whole.

The following table summarizes the six cultural traits from the Asian culture and their American counterparts at tension in tandem.

Table 1. Asian and American Cultural Traits That are in Tension With One Another

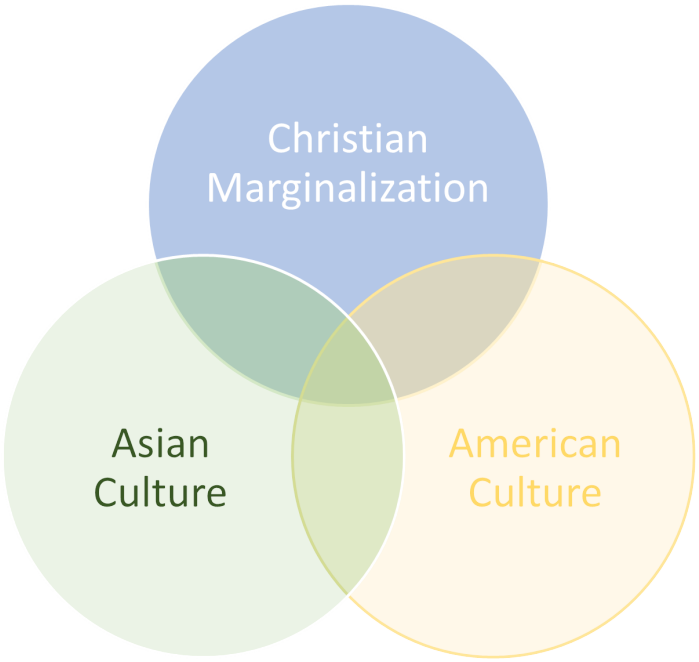
Common Asian Cultural Traits	Common American Cultural Traits
Collectivism	Voluntarism
Conformity to norms	Change and Mobility
Emotional Self-Control	Openness, Honesty, and Direct Communication
Family Recognition Through Achievement	Individual Achievement for Personal Success
Humility	Egocentrism
Filial Piety	Independence, Self- Help, Self-Reliance

Even though an individual's interaction with an Asian culture might be minimal, because culture is the context/consequence of patterned interaction of person with Being(s)/being(s), the formation of Christian marginality is vital for diverse scenarios, contexts, and in extent even though the patterned behavior and thought may be

minimal in their complexities in a person; the degree of complexities might be low in magnitude, but its involvement and its impact on an individual's life cannot be ignored regardless.[2]

Figure 2.

The Necessary Scriptural Integration of Asian Culture and American Culture for Christian Marginality in an Asian American Disciple[3]



In the following pages, consideration for each of the six common Asian cultural traits, their American counterparts, and Christian marginality formation for each of the six trait pairs is given with some relational transformationalism applications.

"Collectivism" versus "Voluntarism"

Formation of Christian marginality from the convergence of collectivism and voluntarism must result in spiritual contours that includes but which does not limit to the following: 1. recognition of an individual's value and uniqueness (2 Tim. 2:19; Rom. 12:14-15, 14:12) 2. proper recognition of a corporate (or group) value and the identity of the church (Ecc. 4:12; 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 12:26, Phil. 2:2, 2:4).

[2] This definition of culture is taken and employed from Enoch Wan and Jon Raibley, *Transformational Change in Christian Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Portland, OR: Western Academic, 2022), 5-6.
[3] Note that the area of overlap between the top circle in the diagram with each of the circles below can vary widely; the theologizing process gets to determine the borders regarding what gets to be included in the Christian marginalization circle from each of the two cultures from the two circles below.

3. denial of a human sovereignty (Prov. 16:9, 19:21; Ps. 115:3) 4. recognition of God's Sovereignty and His place as the Creator over the creations (Isa. 45:7-9; Eph. 1:11; Col. 1:16-17) 5. recognition of an individual's creatureliness and dependency on God (John 1:3; 1 Tim. 6:13). While modern American voluntarism is anchored in self-autonomy and egocentrism as highlighted by modernity and postmodernity, proper understanding of self involves understanding human being's derivativeness and human creatureliness created in the image of God. Because human beings are not the very image of God but created according to the image as the image bearers (Gen. 1:26; 1 Tim. 6:13; Ps. 62:5; John 15:5), they depend directly on Christ Who is the very image of God for their very ontological substance- for their existence, their beings, their make-up's, and everything given to them both in the present perfect and in the future temporally (John 3:27). Having such truth can safeguard the right knowledge of oneself against American voluntarism that is often characterized by self-autonomy and self-sufficiency, and it can help an individual to properly see himself in light of true and rightful vertical relationship which takes precedence over all other relationships.

While the careful delineation of unscriptural elements from the Asian collectivism (characterized by thinking one's group over self, others' needs over self needs, viewing one's achievement as family's achievements) and America's voluntarism (characterized by self-autonomy and self-sufficiency) in lieu of creating the proper contours for the Christian marginality circle is essential for laying a foundation for Asian American discipleship, the conveyance of the truth in the area both doctrinally and practically from a discipler to a disciplee is additionally affected in what kind of interactions and dynamisms the two persons get to have according to relational transformationalism paradigm.[4] One strategic application of relational transformationalism in this area could be helping the disciplee discover and develop his spiritual gifts. Such help in the discovery and development process of the disciplee's gift would highlight the truthfulness of a disciplee's uniqueness in Christ, deepen his understanding and appreciation of his value in the Body of Christ with others, help him grow to have a deeper appreciation for other believers' values and importance, and help him reflect on the collective roles as a body in seeking the advancement of the kingdom of Christ and His gospel with broadened horizons.

[4] These descriptions of collectivism directly adopted from Kim et al. for consistency; Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkins, Peggy H. Yang, "The Asian Values Scale Development, factor analysis, validation, and reliability" *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (1999): 345. Please refer to the following for more detailed discussion of American voluntarism: Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 10.

"Conformity to Norms" versus "Change and Mobility"

Formation of Christian marginality from the convergence of Asian culture's conformity to norms (not deviating from familial and social norms and consideration of bringing disgrace to one's family reputation as the worst thing one can do) with common America's cultural trait of change and mobility (acceptance and appreciation for change as progress and growth) results in refusal of conformity to the world and worldly standards with emphasis in renewal of mind and progressive sanctification after the likeness of Christ.[5] While Asian cultures emphasize to conformity to the norms of a society in general, this can easily lead one to accept scripturally unlawful ideas, transgressional customs, and sinful viewpoints with a lack of discernment. Furthermore, Asian societies' cultural pressure to conform to societal norms and standards stands clearly opposed to the Scripture as Romans 12:2 commands to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Much more, as Jesus warns to "walk through the narrow door" in Matthew 17:13, the path of discipleship cannot be characterized by conformity to the majority standards nor to a simple compliance to a society's norms and majority standards. On the other hand, recontouring of the cultural trait pairs of the category for Christian incorporation does not imply acceptance of almost any arbitrary change as progress and growth neither. As can be seen from many pages of the Scripture, not all changes are good (i.e. Adam and Eve's change of status before God after eating from the forbidden fruit, Cain's receiving of the curse after killing his brother Abel, etc.). This is further delineated by Enoch Wan as he distinguishes two kinds of change from Being(s)/being(s) to Being(s)/being(s) interactions to be either transformational or transgressional (Wan and Raibley 2022, 7). Contrary to America's commonly held cultural value of equating change as progress and growth, renewal of mind and growth in sanctification after the likeness of Christ needs to be emphasized in Asian American discipleship. Such emphasis is scriptural (2 Thes. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:21; Col. 3:1, 3:5; Heb. 12:14; etc.), and is especially important in Asian American discipleship who may have some societal collectivistic tendencies left remaining because progressive sanctification demands disciples' as well as disciplees' individualistic responses and roles for synergistic efforts (Col. 3:10; Phil. 3:12; 1 Pet. 1:14-16; 2 Tim. 2:21; 1 Thes. 4:3).

While teaching to refuse conformity to the world and to the worldly standards and emphasizing the renewal of mind and growth in sanctification after the likeness of Christ is essential in Asian-American discipleship, the conveyance of this teaching from

[5] The defining characteristics of "conformity to norms" was taken from Ki.et al. for consistency; Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkins, Peggy H. Yang, "The Asian Values Scale Development, factor analysis, validation, and reliability" *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (1999): 345.

a discipler to a disciplee is additionally affected in what kind of interactions and dynamics the two get to have according to relational transformationalism. One strategic application of relational transformationalism in this area could be identifying weak areas of a disciplee (i.e. patience, kindness, generosity, etc.), sharing experiences in the areas together, and giving godly and helpful guidance and mentoring in the areas by the discipler to the disicplee. In order to implement this more effectively, a discipler can devise particular settings where the two can be immersed and interact in tandem in relation to those particular weak areas and thereby where both can be strengthened. Such particular settings could be multiple. For instance, this could be requiring participation in larger amount of daily scriptural readings for growth in perseverance, serving frequently in a homeless ministry for more kindness, or cleaning a particular church facility regularly to facilitate growth in diligence and faithfulness (Lk. 16:10) among many others. These settings will provide opportunities for the disciplee to watch the discipler, interact with him, and learn from him not only in "etic" but in "emic" perspectives.

"Emotional Self-Control" versus "Openness, Honesty, and Direct Communication"

Healthy control and management of one's emotions is a crucial part of a discipleship. Nevertheless, such control and management of one's emotions are beyond one's complete control and one's own power. While Asian cultures highly emphasize emotional self-control (adherence to the belief that "one should have sufficient inner resources to resolve emotional problems", association of the ability to control one's emotions as a sign of strength, and belief that "parental love should be implicitly understood and not openly expressed"), due to the lack of total control and one's own power over one's emotions, such emphasis has led many Asians rather to hide their emotions that remain unresolved in the state of conflicts.[6] Because this has led to the state of inner conflicts, it cannot be called as leading to true monitoring, management, and control of one's emotions. On the other hand, the America's general tendency of openness and honesty has allowed many sinful desires and ungodly emotions to be expressed and take root in various aspects of the society. While the Asian culture's emphasis on emotional self-control deserves a merit, it needs to be emphasized that such control and management are not possible solely based on an individual's will and based on mere individual's power. On the other hand, while tolerating an allowable

[6] These characteristics are adapted directly from Kim et al. for consistency with the research; Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkins, Peggy H. Yang, "The Asian Values Scale Development, factor analysis, validation, and reliability" *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (1999): 345. Helen Pong and Meekyung Han point out that many researchers attribute Asian American students' high suicidal rate to underutilization of professional services and link this to failure or poor emotional self-control; Helen Pong and Meekyung Han, "Mental health help-seeking behaviors among Asian American community college students: The effect of stigma, cultural barriers, and acculturation." *Journal of College Students Development* 56 (2015): 1-14.

expression of self-emotion is not necessarily bad, it needs to be taught through the scripture that even such expression needs to be articulated for building up the Body and for the glory of God. This is clear as Ephesians 4:29 declares, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear," and as 1 Corinthians 10:31 explicitly states, "whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

While guarding one's emotions is essential in Christian life and discipleship, this is an area where relational interactions is crucial. Such crucial role relational interactions play in guarding and managing one' emotions can be seen in Proverbs 2:24-25 which states, "Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare." Furthermore, Proverbs 18:24 teaches that "whoever walks with the wise become wise," and with the wise there is control and management of expressions of internal dealings and conditions (Proverbs 29:11).

Christian marginality for this trait pairs involves inclusion and exclusion of various elements. While it may not be possible to list all these elements exhaustively here, it must: 1. exclude emotional self-control based solely on the reliance of self's inner resources 2. exclude egocentric self-expressions that are sinful and rooted in self-autonomy. 3. incorporate expression of self for edification and for God's ultimate glory. 4. Include(account) room for individualistic creativity and uniqueness in Christ. Relationally, these exclusions and inclusions can be strengthened and secured by walking (sharing life together) with the discipler who walks in wisdom, and by establishing interactional networks among other disciplees who also have considerable amount of wisdom and who also walk in it.

"Family Recognition Through Achievement" versus "Individual Achievement for Personal Success"

Although Asian cultures generally promote the zeal for family recognition through achievement ("acceptance of one's need to achieve academically to make one's parents proud," belief in one's "educational failure brings shame to the family," acceptance in one's "occupational failure as bringing shame to the family") and Western culture generally emphasizes one's achievement and success over against establishing and maintaining relationships, Asian Americans need to have Christian marginality of choosing, aiming, and acting according to what brings honor and glory to God in all aspects of life and valuing relationships in Christ against functionalism tendencies (Kim et al. 1999, 345).[7]

[7] These characteristics pertaining to the Asian "family recognition through achievement" are directly adapted from Kim et al. for consistency with the research. For additional descriptions in relation to the American value on achievement and

Seeking the family honor is not necessarily unscriptural. This can be observed by recognizing special honor bestowed on certain families with Messianic promises given to them in the Old Testament (Isaac–Gen. 21:12; Jacob–Gen. 28:14:10; Judah–Gen.49:10; David–2 Sam. 7:12-13). Moreover, seeking the welfare and well-being of one's own family is scriptural (Acts 11:14, 16:33; 1 Tim. 5:8). Nevertheless, such seeking, though important, must be carried within the grand theme of honoring and glorifying God in the forefront. This delineation is crucial because without such delineation many Asian Americans can suffer in encapsulated marginality. It is crucial to teach to disciplees that a proper delineation can place a disciplee into occasional scenarios and contexts that may appear as to some others as if the disciplee is neglecting a family and family recognition for the sake of Christ and for God's glory. As a case in example, this is illustrated in Matthew 8:22 as Lord Jesus does not approve the disciple-to-be to go and bury his dead parent for the family honor. Another clear instance is Christ' crucifixion; such act stood clearly in contrast to seeking the welfare of Mary and the honor of Mary's family. Nevertheless, such occasions are not to be misunderstood as breaking the law since honoring and glorifying God is the ultimate aim and goal of one's life (Matt. 12:3-4, 5-8).

Helping a disciple to navigate through and to have proper and broadened perspectives on family welfare, success, self, and glory of God with all their various interconnections that encompass various scenarios and contextual factors, however, might take time and be particularly challenging. This, nonetheless, can be aided by attempting to strengthen a disciplee's trust to the discipler relationally. Such trust can be strengthened as the discipler lives and demonstrates his seeking of God's glory at the expense of risking misunderstandings by others. In addition to such, the trust can be further strengthened by constant support and encouragements from the discipler and other disicplees to a particular disciplee when the disciplee makes a right yet difficult choice in a family related issue. Such building up of faith will strengthen him to understand more (Eph. 3:18-19) and to make the right decision in the future even if that may be very difficult in his context of the time.

"Humility" versus "Egocentrism"

Asian culture's promotion of humility and American culture's general egocentric tendency need to be filtered through the scripture for true scriptural humility and true selflessness. Asian culture's promotion of humility is linked to developing skills and realizing relations because such Asian culture readily recognizes egocentrism as a

success, refer to the following: Gary Althen and Jane Bennett, *American Ways*, 3rd ed. (London, Intercultural Press, 2011), 21-23.

major hindrance in forming harmony (Parkes 2012, 69-88). Nevertheless, although such recognition may not seem wrong in and of itself on the surface, such Asian culture's recognition which has roots in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism is inherently fallacious because they all begin with wrong premises; they begin with the wrong premise that fallen human beings can truly be free from total depravity and its effects without true regeneration and rebirth through faith in the gospel. Moreover, many criticisms from both inside and outside the Asian societies in regard to Asian societies' failures to show harmony in their respective Asian countries throughout evidently show the lack of sophistication and the lack of proper understanding behind such recognition; such recognition is doomed to failure because it fails to recognize the root cause of human problems but only sees the surface. Furthermore, Y. Joel Wong, Seong Yeon Kim, and Kimberley K. Tran's research on Asian American adherence to Asian values suggests that adherence to such Asian value has positive correlation with depression (Tran, Kim, and Wong 2010, 1).[8]

Because the problem of lack of humility is so engraved in the human nature, one cannot arrive to true humility unless one learns to humble oneself before God and submit to God and to His words through Jesus Christ and His gospel. Without the recognition of one's place before the Absolute One without a forensic justification and without submission to God and His words through Christ and His gospel, one cannot learn true humility nor can one truly be humble. Without a crucifixion of self with a transformation through the gospel, one's acts that may be portrayed as humility according to some is only pretense and suppression of oneself rather than true lowering and self-emptying of self (emptying of one's desires, preferences, use of privileges, rights, egocentric tendencies, etc.) that characterize true humility.

American egocentrism needs to be rejected in like manner due to its antagonistic nature to the scripture and its sinfulness (Matt. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23; Gal. 2:20). Moreover, the principle of egocentrism only sets the stage for an individual "for his complete loss of liberty" and ultimately deprives himself protection "from the idol state (Schlossberg 1990, 217)."[9] In order to cultivate true selflessness opposed to egocentrism in the lives of the disciples, a discipler must rely on the power of the gospel of Christ and the re-creating power and the re-creating act of the Holy Spirit.

[8] Although these researchers used five distinct Asian cultural values in their research including humility as one, they did not specify each of these categories to describe each of their affects on depression in drawing their conclusion. This is because they were more interested in the general construct of relationship of the adherence to the five Asian values (conformity to norms, family recognition through achievement, emotional self-control, collectivism, and humility) altogether by an Asian American with depression.

[9] Please refer to Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture* pages from 216 to 217 for more of egocentrism's potential adverse effects on an individual and on the society.

An application of relational transformationalism in aiding the formation of Christian marginality from the two apparently competing cultures namely Asian cultural humility and America's egocentrism, is directing a disciplee to Christ and aiding him to focus on Him, His character, and His work. This is because the scripture prescribes focusing on Him, His character, and His work as a prescription to cultivate humility (Phil. 2:5). As a young disciplee may experience unhealthy distractions, a discipler can redirect his focus onto Christ, His character, His work, and His words (Matt. 11:29; Lk. 14:11, etc.) by a constant reminder through various kinds of interactions and lessons.

"Filial Piety" versus "Independence, Self-Help, Self-Reliance"

Asian culture's filial piety needs to be filtered and veered to scriptural way of honoring parents, and American culture's high emphasis on independence, self-help, and self-reliance needs to be replaced with reliance on God and healthy dependence on other members of the Body in Christ. According to Iris Chi, James Lubben, Neena Chappell, and Nelson Chow, the authors of *Elderly Chinese in Pacific Rim Countries: Social Support and Integration*, filial piety (*xiao*) is defined in three levels - the first level as looking after the material needs including caring when ill, the second level as paying attention to parents' wishes and obeying their preferences, and the third level as incorporation of pleasing parents and bringing them honor by one's behavior (Chi et al. 2001, 125-136). While these descriptions may not seem harmful at a quick glance, filial piety can enslave one's mobility in following Christ, inhibit an individual's exercise of creativity, hinder a person from yielding his heart according to the directives and desires that are given to the person from God because it presupposes parents' ultimate and supreme authority over the children over all others. Although there has been some modern research which seems to indicate that filial piety is waning with industrialization and modernization, much of it has still been lingering among many Asians in various ways in their cultural make-up (Yeh 1997, 171-214).

On the other hand, the American culture's independence, self-help, and self-reliance stands as a stark contrast to the fifth commandment and scriptural patterns of filial ethics and directives (1 Tim. 5:8; Eph. 6:1-3; Matt. 15:4-6; etc.). Moreover, Christian marginality formation from the two cultures from filial piety conjoined with independence, self-help, and self-reliance is complicated due to various possible scenarios and contextual factors. Several generic principles can be laid out, however. Christian marginality formation from the two cultures' filial piety and independence must incorporate at least the following factors: 1. Parents need to be honored horizontally not overshadowing the vertical relationship. 2. Material support needs to

be provided to the parents when they are incapable of sustaining themselves to the best of the children's ability. 3. Ill parents need to be shown honor by being given the appropriate care by the children when God empowers the children with the abilities and resources to do so 4. Parents' desires and wishes should be obeyed as long as they do not contradict the will and the desires of God.

Relationally, a discipler can function to both push and pull a disciplee in this category verbally. According to the speech act theory, verbal comments or sentences have action inducing force.[10] Relationally, a discipler can employ various illocutionary acts of verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, expositives, and declarations along with a locution (Scripture) prayerfully out of a healthy and dependent vertical relationship for the push and pull to help the disciplee to be found in a safe cultural location (Austin 2020, 95-104).[11]

Conclusion

This study undertook to lay a basic foundation for an overarching Asian American discipleship framework from the perspective of Christian marginality formation for Asian Americans. By synthesizing cultural insights from Bryan S.K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Peggy H. Yang, it offers a comprehensive structure that addresses the current gaps in Asian-American discipleship paradigms. This foundational framework aims to enhance the understanding and practice of discipleship within the context of Asian-American communities and in communities where multiple Asian ethnic heritages are mingled, paving the way for further development and refinement in these fields.

[10] For more on the actual impact of a verbal utterance, see John R. Searle's Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech; John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[11] These illocutionary acts are not limited to only this categorical value pairs but are applicable in others as well.

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Developing Chinese International Students as Evangelists: An Australian Case Study

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Abstract

This case study explores how Chinese international students (CIS) may be empowered to become active gospel bearers. Based on semi-structured interviews and ministry records from ministry on one Australian campus, findings reveal that embedding CIS within a community that models and expects evangelism—through peer imitation, warm discipleship, clearly-defined, simple and repeatable evangelistic tools, and a degree of "pushiness"—catalyzed gospel-sharing. Notably, a blend of "attractional" entry points (e.g., fellowship events) and "missional" practices (e.g., Discovery Bible Studies) enabled discipleship multiplication. Results suggest that embodied evangelistic culture and accessible evangelistic methods may be more important than highly contextualized gospel presentations in developing CIS as reproducing evangelists.

Keywords: *Chinese international students, student evangelism, disciple multiplication, Discovery Bible Study, evangelistic community model*

> July 2015: After taking the bullet train together, my wife and I walked with Lina[1] to her apartment in a large Chinese city. Lina had graduated from an Australian university several years earlier as a fairly new, but dedicated follower of Christ. Amidst our long-awaited catch-up, I asked, "Have you shared about Jesus with anyone here?" She shook her head. "No, people here wouldn't understand about Jesus. But I pray by myself most days."

For decades, international student (IS) ministry has been identified as "mission on our doorstep" for the church in traditional "sending" nations (McCleary 1989). Evangelism to international students has been recognized as a strategic initiative, as

[1] All names of people and institutions in this study have been changed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

overseas students can be trained as evangelists themselves to reach their home nations (Im, Yong, and Chinn 2014, 236–43). In Australia, Chinese international students (CIS; in this study, nationals of mainland China holding student visas) form a large proportion of students on many campuses. After a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic, 153,000 CIS were enrolled in Australian universities in 2024, representing 16% growth year-on-year and 21% of all IS enrolments (Department of Education 2023).

The present author is a cross-cultural ministry practitioner to CIS at a large secular Australian university. In Australia and in other popular CIS destination countries, focused efforts exist to evangelize and disciple international students, and many Australian campuses host student groups dedicated to this cause. However, there are few cases where CIS themselves are effectively raised up to share the gospel on campus.

Holistic Cross-cultural Discipling for Evangelism

Developing insider-culture evangelists is considered a crucial aspect of intercultural missions. Roland Allen highlights the danger that "converts…taught to depend on the missionary… rest passively upon [the missionary]," (Allen 1912, 109) including in the practice of evangelism. Zo claims that early and contemporary mission amongst Chinese people has had a "condescending" mode with foreign missionaries using positions of technological or social superiority (including the use of English language) for missional aims (Zo 2004). This further highlights the importance of focused efforts to "develop, empower and release local workers" (Ott and Wilson 2011, 87) in the Chinese context.

At least three elements can be identified as crucial to in raising up disciples to themselves evangelize: personal relationship building, vision casting, and training in reproducing evangelistic tools. Close holistic relationships, engaging metaphors such as "spiritual parenthood" (Fernando 2019, 21), or "walking alongside disciples" (Hibbert and Hibbert 2018, chap. 1) are seen as primary in discipleship outcomes and in multiplying in particular. "Disciple-making movement" (DMM) and "Church planting movement" (CPM) works advocate that vision casting - clear expression of desired ministry outcomes resulting in others' passionate engagement - mobilizes believers to engage in missional activities (Smith and Kai 2011, chap. 11,; Garrison 2004, chap. 14). The immediate provision of simple and effective evangelistic tools allows new believers to imitate and share the gospel (Smith and Kai 2011, chap. 13; Ott and Wilson 2011, 88; Addison 2011, 111). Maintaining a balance between consistency (Smith and Kai 2011, 190) and adaptability (Addison 2011, chap. 5) in evangelistic tools taught to disciples is

essential. In one Australian campus group following such principles, new believers began to share the gospel within weeks (Milne and Cronshaw 2021).

Furthermore, DMM/CPM proponents have found what may be termed as "missional" methods of evangelism to be more conducive to raising up reproducing disciples, as opposed to "attractional" methods. Smith and Kai (2011, 40, 263) state that the Great Commission promotes a "go, not come" stance to evangelism, warning against approaches that "invite people to come to us". Similarly, David and Paul Watson (2014, chap. 13) advise against relying on "extractional" approaches delivered to individuals by highly qualified outsiders. Rather, they recommend evangelism strategies that engage people with the gospel in their own community environment, which may lead to conversion of groups as a whole.

Understanding the cultural context of CIS is crucial in equipping and motivating them for evangelism. InterVarsity's 150-page practitioners' booklet (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA 2021, chap. 5) and other works characterize Chinese culture as collectivist (Chhokar, Brodbeck, and House 2013; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010, chaps. 2, 4), emphasizing group membership and conformity to group norms. Thus, developing evangelists among CIS may involve fostering relationships and group culture (Moon and Moreau 2017, chap. 1, "Widening the Community" and 'Individual versus Collective Identity"; Hibbert and Hibbert 2018, 122). High-context communication, which relies on unspoken cues and indirect messaging (Hall 1989, 91, 93, 113; Plueddemann 2012, 79), is prevalent among Chinese students (X. Yang 2016; Kim, Pan, and Park 1998). As Danny Hsu notes (2017), even modern "hybridized" Chinese culture maintains strong elements of collective ties and "practice-oriented" spirituality. Evangelism trainers of CIS must attend to non-verbal messages and create a conducive learning environment that includes shared meals, warm relationships (Wan 2019, chap. 2), and implicit permission for lay believers to teach others (Hibbert and Hibbert 2018, "Create a warm learning environment" in chap. 12).

Several challenges hinder the development of CIS evangelists, including low levels of previous religious participation - according to one survey, 90-95 per cent of CIS had rarely or never participated in church activities before studying overseas (F. G. Yang et al. 2016) - and the transitory nature of their life-stage (Cocanower and Mordomo 2021). Anecdotally, relatively small relational networks and time pressures also limit their engagement in relational evangelism and time-intensive training.

Mission bodies such as the Lausanne Movement, OMF and Intervarsity have published research regarding the already challenging work of evangelism towards and

pastoral care for CIS (Toit 2019; Hartwell 2004) and their retention in Christian communities after returning to China (Phillip 2018). However, there is limited evidence-based research specifically focused on the formation of evangelists among CIS. It should be added that CIS's participation in evangelistic mission may be a practical step towards long-term maturity and retention (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA 2021, chap. 15).

So, the crucial work of developing CIS evangelists will likely include a holistic approach emphasizing personal relationship, vision casting and imparting "missional" evangelistic tools. Attention to elements of Chinese culture such as the importance of group norms and unspoken cues may be useful. While the challenges have been documented, there is a paucity of research on evidence-based practices in this area.

Research Question and Methodology

The present study addresses the research question: *How may CIS best be equipped and motivated to effectively share the gospel with other CIS?* Related sub-questions touch on the relationship between evangelism trainers and CIS, methods of vision casting, and training in evangelistic tools.

Methodology and Data Sources

Initially planned as a comparative case study (Johnson 2018), the research shifted to a single case study due to limited available cases fitting the criterion of groups who had observed multiple CIS engaged in evangelism over a period of several years. The group in focus was "Joy in Jesus Fellowship" (JJF) at "Australian University" (AU), located in an urban center in Australia. Semi-structured interviews between September and December 2021 formed the primary data source (Shaw 2011, 144–56). These online interviews (in Mandarin and English; COVID restrictions prevented face-to-face interviews) involved 4 CIS evangelists, 3 JJF ministry staff or ministry affiliates, 2 non-CIS students, one local church pastor, and one ministry worker and former CIS from another group on the same campus as a comparative case. Five participants were female and six were male. Secondary data included ministry records, reports and photos, training materials, and public-access resources about the campus. Interview questions focused on CIS evangelism to other students, excluding off-campus or post-graduation evangelistic activities.

After transcription of the interviews, inductive data analysis (c.f. Yin 2018, chap. 5) using NVivo software included three stages: initial coding according to interview questions, review of responses to identify factors aiding in CIS evangelist development (Gray 2003), and grouping and sub-coding of relevant factors, including mapping relationships and influence within the group. Triangulation between interviews and additional data sources facilitated a comprehensive analysis (Baxter and Jack 2008). A summary of the findings was provided to participants for member checking, after which feedback from three respondents was used to verify, modify, and interpret the findings (Baxter and Jack 2008).

As a case study, this study does not claim representativeness but aims to stimulate reflection and experimentation in other contexts.

Findings

I. General Observations

AU's main campus hosted around 40,000 students with an international community of 12,000 - 17,000 students. Chinese International Students (CIS) reported enjoying various green spaces on campus, but also faced challenges connecting with non-Christian local peers, as well as high study pressures leading to stress and depression in some.

"Joy in Jesus" Fellowship (JJF)

JJF, the international student arm of a global mission organization at AU's main campus, exhibited growth between 2015 and 2019 in staff, evangelism training attendees, and conversions. Reported conversions increased from 30 in 2014, to 95 in 2016 and 112 in 2018, as shown in in figure 1. JJF's activities included a weekly public meeting ("Spark"), small groups meeting for discovery Bible study (DBS) and student leader (SL) meetings. Several respondents reported one chain of five generations of conversions and discipleship amongst CIS, where CIS A evangelized CIS B, who subsequently evangelized student C and so on. Aaron supplied a diagram of this set of relationships which he had used in training presentations, shown in figure 2. This evidences gospel sharing by multiple CIS over a number of years. However, post-2019 transitions, including staff relocation and the COVID pandemic, disrupted JJF's ministry, impacting CIS evangelist training.

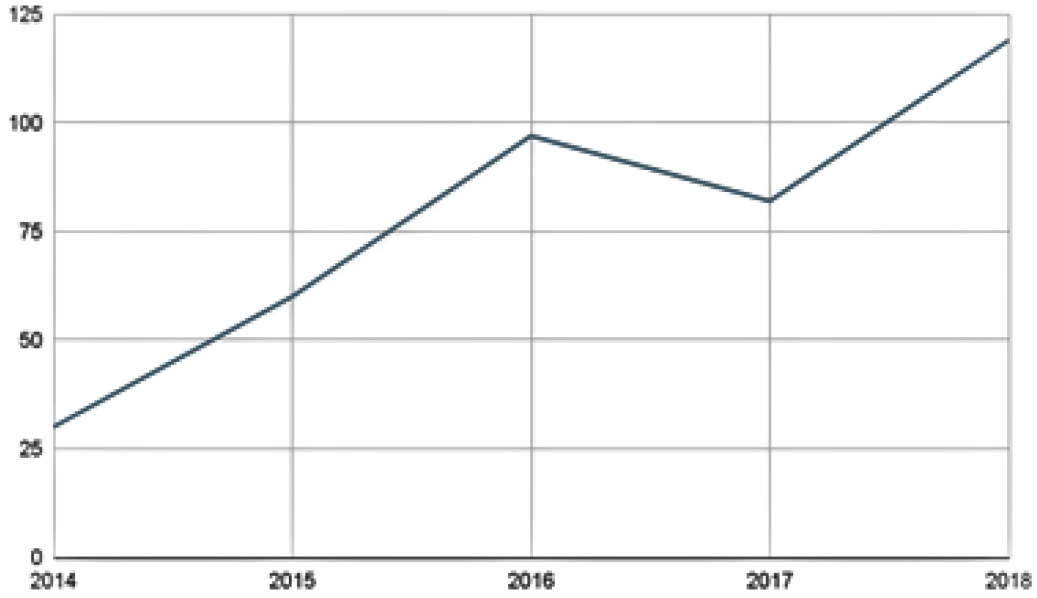

Figure 1. Reported conversions by year in JJF

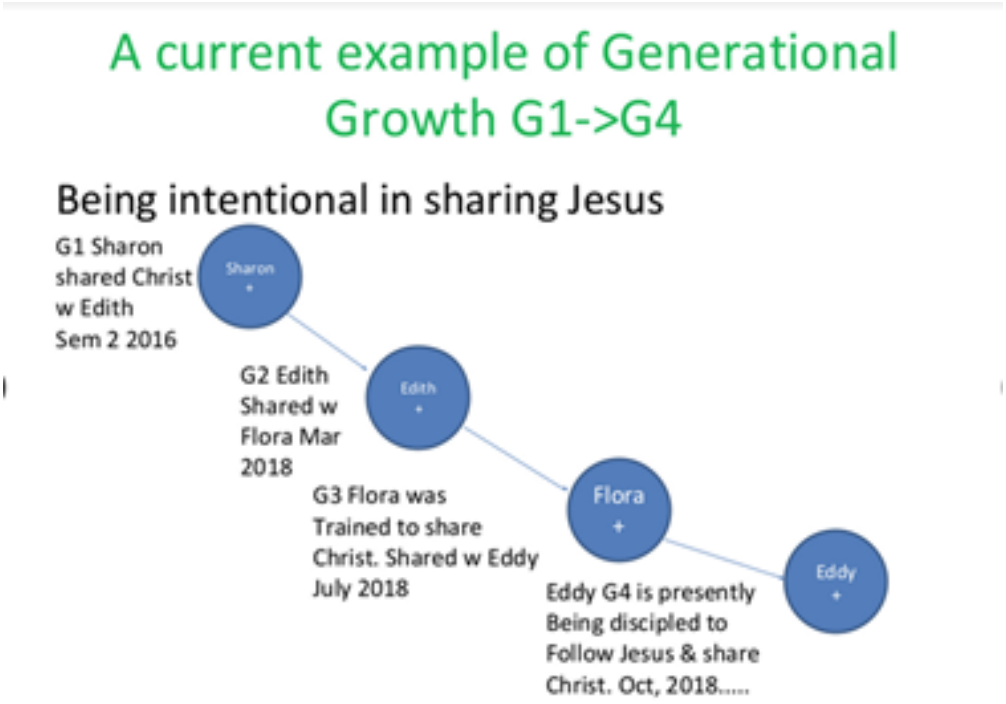

Figure 2.

A diagram depicting an example of generations of evangelism in JJF (also employing pseudonyms, differing to the ones used in this study), used by Aaron to train JJF staff workers.

II. Persistently and Graciously Encouraging and Expecting All Disciples to Make Disciples

According to staff and students alike, JJF's evangelistic "culture" explains the prevalence of CIS evangelists. Evangelism trainers intentionally created, and CIS appreciated, an environment of expectation to evangelize through highlighting student evangelists for imitation, consistent and frequent encouragement to share the gospel, orientation of all community activities towards evangelism, clarifying students' commitment to evangelism and supporting evangelists in warm relationships.

Firstly, highlighting student evangelists for imitation proved effective in raising up a body of CIS evangelists, as CIS evangelists and trainers in JJF frequently cited the influence of observing the evangelistic activities of their peers. SL meetings and Spark both regularly included "testimony times" where students reported on their evangelistic activities. CIS Cyrus credited much of his development as an evangelist to his observations of CIS Elly and Nadine:

> From [Elly] I learned, what is obedience, what is prayer, what is waiting… she had many testimonies that moved me… From [Nadine], you can see an example who can encourage you, [that] believing and serving the Lord can be so beautiful. How joyful you can be.

One CIS identified that this tapped into Chinese culture, where learning by imitation is particularly important.

Secondly, several JJF students and staff mentioned that "pushiness", mostly from staff members, to take specific evangelistic steps, was influential in their own or others' evangelism. Staff team leader Aaron was known for pulling students aside during social dinners and asking, "Can you please share the gospel with that person?" He would also persistently invite believers to evangelism training activities or conferences.

Although some ISs found this "pushiness" overbearing, respondents benefited from and appreciated it. For example, CIS Elly reflected, "If he is pushy, he is pushy for God, he isn't pushy for himself… [So,] I don't mind experiencing this pushiness". Non-Chinese international SL Otille similarly said,

> A bit of pushiness helps, actually. [CIS] can be a bit shy…. [Aaron] doesn't do it in an authoritarian way, but he encourages us…very consistently.

Thirdly, almost every activity of JFF was either evangelistic in nature or involved training or encouragement in evangelism. Weekly Spark fellowship meetings were primarily evangelistic. Bible study groups and discipleship curricula included both evangelism training and dedicated time to prepare for upcoming evangelism opportunities. Summer and Winter conferences all featured evangelism training, vision-casting sessions and evangelism practicum sessions. SL meetings included "God Stories" where students reported their evangelistic activity.

Fourthly, disciplers clarified and prioritized students' commitment to evangelism. At the end of the annual start-of-year conference, JJF leaders called for a formal commitment to evangelism called the "SL Agreement". Those who signed up as SLs formed the majority of evangelists. The SL Agreement focused student activity on two areas: (1) meeting regularly one-to-one with JJF staff or senior students (including evangelism training) and (2) forming and/or co-leading an evangelistic Discovery Bible Study (DBS) group.[2] Other activities within JJF were portrayed as secondary. Local SL Andy reflects that some students could not commit to many activities but:

> I guess the minimum, the basic thing that they wanted an SL to be involved in, was Discovery Bible study. That was the crux or the basis of the movement.

Even for students who did not sign the SL Agreement, negotiating commitments around this "core" encouraged time-poor students to prioritize evangelism.

Finally, a sense of community helped in various stages of CIS taking evangelistic action. CIS evangelists often reflected on their relationship with their discipler as influential in their motivation to share the gospel. Also, the bonds between SLs made community events more attractive, making invitation, frequently the first step in evangelism, much easier. Andy (local SL) said: "I think it helped that our student leadership team... became good friends ourselves. It became a fun thing to be at, we had a lot of fun running it."

Similarly, CIS evangelist Elly said: "Life in this fellowship was very beautiful ... Everyone together, it was like having God's wings on our back. ... The passion you have for sharing the gospel, it's pure, that feeling, in the fellowship, bringing people to believe in Christ."

[2] Other possible commitments for SLs were attendance at Spark weekly fellowship meetings, and attendance at SL Fellowship meetings, and a Summer or Winter conference.

III. Clear, Consistent Steps for Evangelists

As well as persistent encouragement and expectation to evangelize, respondents in JJF recurrently referred to several clear steps that CIS could take to share the gospel, and that discipler-trainers would take to assist them. The "how to" of evangelism was not left to the individual, but explicitly taught in a standardized way. This "evangelistic pathway" was explicitly present in JJF staff documents, and consistently practiced by CIS evangelists. In addition, the process of training evangelists was also clear for disciplers.

Consistency was key for CIS learning to evangelize. Students in JJF had repeated opportunities to learn and implement a "set method of evangelism" (Elly, CIS evangelist). The steps of this process were frequently rehearsed, giving CIS clarity on how to share their faith. CIS Nadine said that, in her first years as a believer,

> I was leading [evangelistic Bible studies] *over and over*... There are only 7 stories [in the evangelistic DBS curriculum], and I read these stories maybe hundreds of times... They trained me *over and over again to use the same thing*, and also they encouraged me to share my testimony... they say, Nadine, can you share your testimony here, can you share your testimony [there]? But they reminded me... what is most important to share.

The first step by which CIS could participate as beginner evangelists was helpfully easy: invitation to events that met felt needs of CIS. These included regular fellowship meetings and social outings. CIS evangelist Elly shares how these events made this first step easier for believers:

> It's kind of like it's in the middle... Sometimes it's very hard for you to personally invite someone [to believe in Jesus]... but every week we have Spark. ... At uni it's really hard to make friends. And Spark is a place ... where you find your friends in uni.

The intermediate steps in evangelism were equally clear: personal testimony and a succinct gospel presentation. Lesson 1 of JJF's post-conversion discipleship curriculum includes training in telling a personal testimony and short gospel presentation (a standard gospel presentation used globally by JJF's parent organization). CIS Nadine recalled,

> Straight after believing they asked me to share my testimony in their regular meeting. I was nervous... but they just told me to share about why

> I decided to believe in Jesus. I felt excited and free to do it. It helped me to be more sure of my faith.

Afterwards, Nadine regularly used her personal story to share with others.

While more experienced evangelists eventually did improvise in how they shared the gospel, all CIS evangelists began with these same methods of sharing the gospel.

The crucial step in the evangelistic process was an interactive Discovery Bible Study. Once students had shared the gospel, they invited friends to read the Bible with them. As noted in Nadine's comments above, evangelists went through an established curriculum of Bible studies, used widely throughout the world. Local student evangelist Andy described DBS groups as "the crux... of the movement". CIS evangelist Ace's journey to believing in Jesus involved first attending Spark, and from there joining a DBS group. He summarizes, "the weekly JJF meeting [Spark], this is where everyone invites each other to do Bible study - it's mainly through this way."

Thus, both staff and students appeared to have a clear picture of the evangelistic process, from initial invitation, to the intermediate step of sharing gospel content in daily life, to Bible study groups.

In addition, while CIS had clarity on their own evangelistic steps, evangelism trainers in JJF were also clearly aware of their pathway towards developing evangelists. This included semi-formal instruction through discipleship relationships and practical demonstration and experience .

One key tool for evangelist trainer-disciplers was semi-formal instruction in evangelism. When a student professed faith in Jesus, evangelism trainers invited them to a discipleship relationship involving instruction in Biblical foundation, character formation and skills for evangelism. Similar training was also provided in annual Summer and Winter conferences.

Even more important for evangelist trainers was modeling and practical experience in evangelism. Aaron (JJF staff team leader) indicated that MAWL (Model, Assist, Watch, Leave) was important in his approach. Olivia (JJF staff, former non-Chinese IS) also adopted this practice:

> We would try and put them at ease by saying, "Your first time going out [in first-contact evangelism], don't worry, you don't have to say anything,

> you can just watch..." Usually students, once they get to learn, "Oh, it's not actually that bad, we can find students to chat with," they will be chatting too.

Most CIS evangelists referred to first-contact evangelism times (SOW hour, Summer Conference) where they witnessed more experienced believers modeling evangelism, and then through imitation finding motivation to practice evangelism themselves.

Nadine (CIS evangelist) said,

> Every time there was a time to go out [to] share, I just listened... then [one time the JJF staff member I was accompanying], just asked me to read out the [gospel presentation] booklet. It felt very awkward - I really didn't even know what I was sharing! But it helped me to understand a bit more.

CIS evangelist Elly recounts,

> When you do this "sharing gospel", you will certainly have that kind of... happiness, to see people changing. Not just coming from [others' teaching] ... when you go to do it yourself, you will taste this happiness.

Cyrus (CIS evangelist) similarly says,

> I remember the first time that I did SOW, I was like, nervous... I didn't know what to do! ...but I kept going ... You will realize that when you do SOW, you have a strange enjoyment... I put importance on this feeling, I think it comes from God.

This "MAWL" principle was also employed in helping CIS to begin leading DBS groups. CIS first assisted more experienced believers in leading. Once they could lead independently, trainers continued to support them. Elly (CIS evangelist) said of one JJF staff:

> When I would go and ask him and say, "I have a problem with this student [in a DBS group]," he would say, "I'll go with you..." I felt this was very supportive. He didn't have to tell me anything, he would go with me.

Discussion

Feasibility of a Disciple-multiplying Vision Amongst Chinese International Students

This study suggests that despite the presence of common obstacles in international student work, cultivating CIS evangelists is achievable. For JJF, early and intentional involvement in evangelism helps combat student transience. Intensive training and extensive modeling addressed deficiencies in biblical background. Clear prioritization of evangelism mitigated the effect of study pressures and time-poverty amongst CIS by subordinating other commitments within the community to evangelism.

Embody evangelistic vision to create an evangelistic group culture amongst collectivistic and high-context communicators

As hypothesized, a sense of belonging to a community that was driven towards evangelism, matching the high-context communication ,(Hall 1989, 91, 93, 113; Plueddemann 2012, 79) and collective orientation of CIS (Chhokar, Brodbeck, and House 2013; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010, chaps. 2, 4), appeared to lead to the development of evangelistic behaviors and beliefs (Hibbert and Hibbert 2018, 122).

More important than explicit teaching, evangelistic vision was embodied through "every aspect [of the community being] aligned with its overarching purpose" (Addison 2011, 61), as expected in high-context cultural settings. Evangelism was ubiquitous throughout JJF activities, from public testimonies of students' evangelism experiences, to evangelism training included in basic discipleship material, and the seeker-oriented atmosphere in weekly meetings. As indicated by Ott and Wilson (2011, 87, 351) and Fernando (2019, 21), warm relationships signified to CIS that evangelism training and even "pushiness" to evangelize was part of a more holistic vision of personal growth.

JJF's leadership structure similarly embodied and encouraged evangelistic vision. The SLs constituted a leadership "in-group" similar to those Rupp describes (2021), but characterized by lay leadership (making it more accessible to CIS) (Watson and Watson 2014, 178–79) and selected with a distinct focus on evangelistic practice. In keeping with broader findings regarding written contracts in high-context cultures (Moreau et al. 2014, 133–38), while the written contract of the SL Agreement was not strongly influential, the discussions around it clearly indicated the priority of evangelism in the community.

In contrast to the impact of implicit embodiment of evangelistic vision on CIS, explicit vision casting seems more effective for the deployment of non-Chinese

evangelism trainers (both staff and SLs). While there was not unanimous or immediate acceptance of Aaron's vision amongst students and staff, this frequent vision casting does seem to have mobilized and unified the team (Smith and Kai 2011, chap. 8).

Clarity and User-friendliness Over Contextualized Content in Gospel Tools

Given the strong calls in cross-cultural discipleship literature to seek a specifically contextualized gospel presentation (Hibbert and Hibbert 2018; Georges 2016), it was surprising that CIS evangelists embraced evangelistic methods (e.g. the gospel presentation and DBS Scripture curriculum) developed for non-Chinese audiences. Apparently, more important than contextualized content was the clarity arising from consistent promotion of a single gospel sharing tool (Smith and Kai 2011, 190). In addition, user-friendly steps that made it easy for novice evangelists aided their development. These included providing the presentation in a booklet format, and supporting the gospel presentation with other methods of gospel sharing, such as invitation to events and DBS.

Integrating "Attractional" and "Missional" Methods of Evangelism

Despite the overall adoption of a CPM approach, JJF's practice did not appear to follow some CPM literature's advice against reliance on invitation to "attractional" events. In contrast to Smith and Kai's (2011, 40, 263) and Watson and Watson's (2014, chap. 13) assessments, inviting others to such events became a simple and natural way in which CIS started as evangelists, and created a sense of community where it was felt to be lacking amongst the wider community of CIS on campus. This integration of "attractional" and "missional" approaches brought its own limitations, for example a degree of reliance on these events and the people who organized them was exhibited by some CIS discontinuing evangelism if invitation was unsuccessful.

However, JJF largely overcame the temptation for students to take a passive role by giving ministry roles such as Bible talks and event planning organization to students. The staff had their own role - constantly "pushing" students to evangelism through word and example, within the MAWL framework. Contextual factors, perhaps related to the diaspora nature of CIS ministry, such as distance from family and low hostility to the gospel (compared to the contexts of other CPM literature) may also allow "attractional" activities to play a more successful role. So, while not every CIS became an evangelist, "enough of them [were] doing it, there's that culture that it becomes normal" (Olivia, evangelism trainer).

Conclusions

Embedding CIS in a community that both nurtured and embodied an intensely evangelistic vision moved CIS to observe, attempt and eventually lead in evangelism themselves. This vision was embodied in elements such as persistent encouragement to evangelize, forming a leadership team focused on evangelism, and exposing students to evangelism in every type of community activity. This appeared to speak more clearly to CIS than the explicit vision casting required for the non-Chinese evangelism training team.

In addition, evangelistic steps that are accessible, clear and taught consistently seem to aid CIS in beginning and then confidently progressing in evangelism. Beginning with simple steps such as inviting friends to events, this may progress to a simple gospel presentation and eventually evangelistic Bible study sets, a progression which may provide the structure required to induct CIS into evangelistic practice. The observations of this study challenge the notion that precise contextualization of evangelism presentations is necessary for effective outreach, suggesting rather that CIS are more sensitive to unambiguous instruction and community support than to verbal cultural appropriateness.

This study also somewhat challenges the dichotomy between "attractional" and "missional" styles of evangelism, showing that invitation to attractive events can be a helpful entry-point for CIS into greater levels of evangelistic responsibility.

This study calls for the development of further research. COVID-19 restrictions prevented in-situ observation of evangelism training efforts. These findings may be tested in other contexts both amongst CIS and other groups. Also, studies into the maintenance of evangelistic practice in the long term amongst CIS post-graduation would further sharpen discipleship efforts.

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REVIEW: *Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives* by Sofanit T. Abebe & Elizabeth W. Mburu

REVIEWED BY
COLLIN CORNELL

Sofanit T. Abebe, Elizabeth W. Mburu, Abeneazer G. Urga, eds. *Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives*. London: T&T Clark, 2024. xvi + 199 pp
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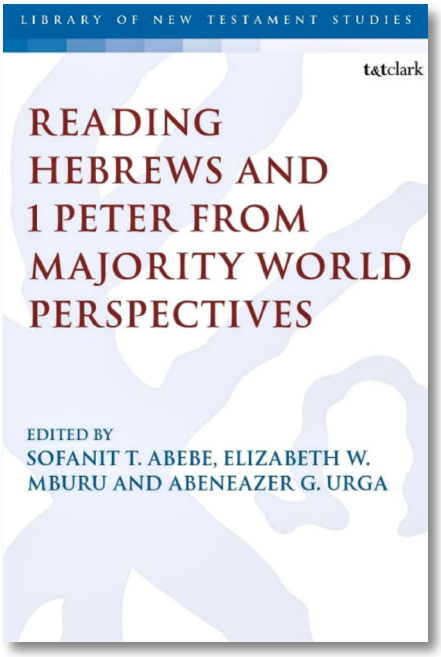

Reading Hebrews and 1 Peter from Majority World Perspectives contains eleven chapters, eight dedicated to Hebrews and three addressing 1 Peter. Five are written by African scholars, three from Ethiopia. Other individual contributors come from Indonesia, Guatemala, China, India, and Malaysia—and, interestingly, Quebec. A Canadian scholar, LeMarquand, introduces the collection, and a Norwegian professor, Grindheim, offers a closing twelfth chapter of summary and critical response. Six of the sixteen total contributors are women.

On the whole, then, it is a book mostly about Hebrews and mostly by African authors, arguably befitting both the relative length of the two New Testament epistles and the relative weight of African Christianity within the global Christian majority. The volume is also distinguished in virtue of being the first of 700 entries in the T&T Clark's Library of New Testament Studies series to feature the terminology of "Majority World" in its title. In their opening acknowledgments, the editors note the "often-held assumption that exegesis and theology from and for Europe and North America are objective and bias-free and thus constitute the norm while other readings are de-facto 'reader-response,' subjective, a form of 'eisegesis' and thus outliers that can be safely ignored" (ix). By publishing in this prestigious, scientific, and western scholarly series, they seek to counteract this impression.

Their success at doing so is questionable. The closing chapter by Grindheim characterizes the volume directly in terms of reader-response (179), and indeed, given the volume's methodological eclecticism, attention to social and cultural locations is its

only unitive factor. The relationship between text and context varies widely across the volume. Some authors leverage the biblical text to challenge local Christian practice: Fedes's chapter 3 examines the theme of solidarity in Hebrews to call for greater hospitality toward migrants in Chile. Chapter 5 by Terefe insists on the intercessory ministry of Christ in Hebrews 7:25 over against Ethiopian Orthodox concern that Christ's praying jeopardizes his divinity. Chapter 7 by Qina exegetes the spiritual supremacy of Christ's sacrifice in Hebrews 10, while accommodating the ongoing practice of Xhosa ancestor sacrifices. Chapter 8 by Nsiah and Dawson uses Rahab's example in Joshua and Hebrews to invite support for Ghanaian sex workers. Other authors use local traditions to silhouette dimensions of the biblical text, as, for instance, the volume's chapters on 1 Peter. One chapter is hardly exegetical at all; Feng's chapter 4 presents a fine study of Watchman Nee's trichotomy but relates only incidentally to Hebrews 4:12. The quality of the negotiations between text and context also varies; the toggle from one to the other can be abrupt or disjointed.

A number of historical claims may also meet resistance among western readers. For example: chapter 1 by Urga argues for the Pauline authorship of Hebrews on the basis of the ancient Ethiopian commentary tradition. It is interesting that the Ethiopian church inherits several interpretations from Clement and Cyril (e.g., Paul's alleged strategic anonymity) but unpersuasive as a matter of historical scholarship. Similarly, chapter 9 by George attempts an intercultural reading of 1 Peter calibrated to experiences of persecution in India—a salutary project whose credibility may founder insofar as it is premised on eyewitness Petrine authorship. Fortin's sixth chapter on composite citations in Hebrews vis-à-vis the struggles of Christian believers in a French Canadian context contends—dubiously—that Jesus taught the disciples to use composite citations (90).

For evangelical missiology, the volume yields plentiful fodder for reflection; it will be selectively useful for academics and students, less so for practitioners. Some value is retrospective: the legacy of mission to the Batak in Saulina's chapter, Feng's chapter on Chinese translation histories, and especially Qina's chapter on Xhosa names for God contain cautionary tales. Other lessons are more prospective: Saulina's interest in "attractiveness" holds hermeneutical potential, Feng's treatment of Local Churches is instructive, and George's chapter is the most overtly engaged with intercultural or missional literature.

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REVIEW: *Developing a Leadership Training Model for Churches* by Endale Gebremeskel Ousman

REVIEWED BY
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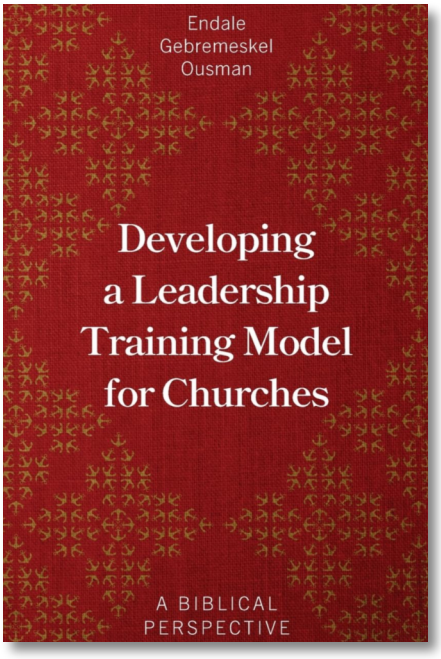
Ousman, Endale Gebremeskel, *Developing a Leadership Training Model for Churches*. Langham Academic, 2024. Pp 178, ISBN: 978-1786410016 $22.99 paperback.



Endale Gebremeskel Ousman's *Developing a Leadership Training Model for Churches* explores the need for an alternative approach to leadership development in Ethiopia, one that differs from traditional theological education. He addresses the shortcomings of current models that often neglect local context, fall short in spiritual formation, and fail to meet the language needs of learners. His proposed model is biblically grounded, culturally contextualized, and community owned.

I deeply appreciate the author's emphasis on the Holy Spirit, the empowerment of women and children, and his commitment to dismantling ethnocentrism. His desire to preserve cultural values while also challenging perspectives that conflict with Scripture is especially commendable. Yet his most striking contribution is in his critique of the divide between the seminary and the church. As he writes, "the findings of this research are warnings of how the Western model of training has caused a divorce between church and theological training" (121). This is a particularly insightful observation.

Although his focus is on Ethiopia, the challenge he names is also relevant to others shaped by Western education, including within the West itself. It is past time to revisit the purpose of theological education and realign it with the needs of the church. This is a call to reimagine how church leaders are formed, not only where Western models have failed to serve local communities, but even in the West, where this divide hinders the mission of both church and seminary.

The author did not include the word "*Ethiopia*" in his title, and for that I'm grateful. Too often, Western readers overlook valuable works by assuming that a focus on another context—especially one outside the U.S.—has little relevance for them. This book would be especially helpful for seminary professors and administrators, leaders of international Christian organizations, and denominational or network pastors reflecting on leadership development. The literature review in Chapter 2 would also benefit graduate students grappling with the importance of contextualization.

There is one point that may simply require further explanation. The author helpfully emphasizes a biblical theological foundation and explores Jesus as an example. However, near the end of the book, he states, "Biblical training is authoritative whereas academic training is opinion oriented. Biblical training says, 'The Bible says…' whereas academic training says, 'I think…' "(114). This kind of dichotomous approach feels somewhat out of step with the rest of his thoughtful and balanced approach to the topic.

While I do not question the authority of Scripture, when it is taught by a fallible human who must make interpretive decisions, biblical training may not always hold a pure advantage over academic training. Perhaps the contrast between 'the bible says,' and 'I think…' reflects less a statement of truth and more a difference in posture—one of humility that academia often cultivates, as opposed to the tone of certainty that preachers may sometimes adopt.

This small critique does not diminish the overall value of the book. The text powerfully articulates the need for contextualized leadership training in a world that too often attempts to replicate models from one context to another without considering the impact. I remember a time when I served as coordinator of an MA Leadership program. The program director, with great enthusiasm, once shared with me a proposal about partnering with other schools to offer our MA in several different countries. As I looked through the list of locations, one of which was Ethiopia, he was surprised that I did not share his excitement. I was not at all confident that we had done the necessary work to contextualize our program for vastly different places. I now wish I had been able to share the wisdom of this book with him at that time.

One of the great blessings for Christians today is the ability to connect and share ideas with believers around the world. But doing so requires wisdom. Endale Gebremeskel Ousman's work is a meaningful step in that direction.

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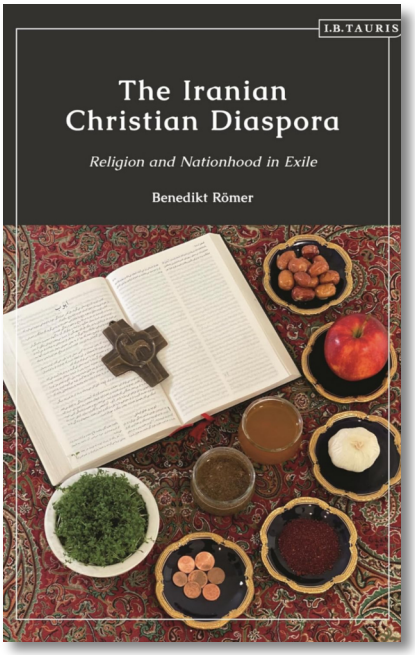
REVIEW: *The Iranian Christian Diaspora: Religion and Nationhood in Exile*
by Benedikt Römer

REVIEWED BY
PHILIP O. HOPKINS

Benedikt Römer, *The Iranian Christian Diaspora: Religion and Nationhood in Exile* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2024).
236 pages. $115.00. ISBN: 978-0755651689. Hardback.



Postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Cultural Studies at Bundeswehr University, Munich, Germany, Bendikt Römer, writes *The Iranian Christian Diaspora: Religion and Nationhood in Exile*. This work about expatriate Christians of Iranian origin is a revised account of his PhD dissertation from the University of Bayreuth (Germany) in 2022. Römer links the idea of "being Iranian" with Iranian Christianity and argues that Iranian Christians forced to live outside their country combine being Iranian with being Christian into one "national-religious identity" (8).

Along with an introduction and conclusion, Römer's work is divided into six chapters. He begins by discussing the historical and theoretical concepts related to his topic, including the definitions of the terms "religion," "nation", and "diaspora," which he believes are not unbiassed expressions, and provides an overview of Christianity in Iran during the modern period (chapters 1 and 2). He follows by explaining how Iranian Christians in the diaspora "Christianize" certain Iranian poets and holidays (chapters 3 and 4). Römer then ends by addressing the extremes of Islamiosity (the ideology that defines Muslim communities by their faith) and Islamophobia (chapter 5) and makes clear why the Iranian Christian expatriate community connects their identity with biblical prophecy and the nation of Iran itself (chapter 6).

As Iranians are becoming disenfranchised with Islam and looking to alternative forms of faith, including Christianity, the desire to maintain being Iranian takes on greater meaning, especially when forced to live abroad. Much of the work in the

beginning sections helps understand these realities. While the data on the history of Christianity in Iran is gathered from secondary and tertiary sources, it is nonetheless helpful in providing the necessary background. It paints a picture of why connectedness among diasporic Iranian Christians and their home country is important. This is foundational because in later sections Römer explains that Iranian Christians, especially in the diaspora, have Christianized Iranian leaders, poets, and holidays because Christianity in Iran has a stigma of foreignness.

Iranian leaders like Cyrus the Great (arguably Zoroastrian), poets such as Hafez (Muslim), and non-Christian holidays like Norouz and Yalda (near Easter and Christmas, respectively), have taken on a meaning and an identity different than their origin. Exiled Christian Iranians contrast and promote these people and events (and others like them) against devout Muslim leaders and overt Islamic holidays, thus giving them an identity with their native country. Indeed, some diasporic Iranian Christians see themselves like the Israelites of the Old Testament with their exile and subsequent return to their homeland (170).

Römer's belief that religion, nation, and diaspora are not neutral terms becomes significant as these expressions come with "epistemological baggage" that separates them into silos. He argues this division stems from an Enlightenment motif and clouds their use today (37). In contrast, for example, Römer believes that religion is part of nation, specifically religious affiliation and nationhood (38). He writes, "Nationhood [sic] endeavors to define true belonging to a particular nation usually content themselves with the mentioning of a particular religious tradition supposedly intertwined with particular nations" (42, italics his). While this may be accurate to state about some faiths, it is problematic for Christianity, not the least of which is the assessment – rightly or wrongly – that the identity of the Christian faith is woven into the very fabric of certain nation(s) and vice-versa.

As Iranian Christians are excluded by Iranian authorities from full participation in the Iranian state, the idea Römer is trying to promote – that Iranian Christians in exile who are largely from Muslim backgrounds want to feel like they belong to Iran – makes sense, but he fails to grasp an essential tenant of the Christian faith: biblical Christianity in its purest form is apolitical. When outsiders like Römer see the opposite that is more of a condemnation of Christian practice than it is of his incorrect understanding. However, Römer differentiates religious nationalism and secular nationalism (43), which does not come from a lack of understanding, but from his own preconceived notion. This distinction is at best a false dichotomy. Secularism itself is a

religion, and every ideology or belief whether it is "religious" or not has sets of presuppositions that render it a matter of faith. That stated, his larger point – that one can be both Iranian Christian or Iranian Muslim without losing the identity of either faith or religion – accurately shows neither faith nor religion are mutually exclusive from one another.

Römer's work while revised from his PhD dissertation (vii) still seems PhD dissertation-like. Its format, focus, and structure are of an academic thesis argued in a European context. This is helpful for the reader who seeks a reason for the desire that Iranian Christians in exile have for connectedness to their country. It is well written and researched, but partial in its own right toward a secular, non-Christian, sociological approach. Römer believes a main reason Iranians are turning away from Islam is because the Shiism of the Iranian administration is exclusionary towards those that disagree with it. The Islamic Republic has "failed to live up to its own promises of freedom and social justice" (139), he writes. This is a reminder to Christians that relying on government to promote and protect Christianity has its own issues that need reconciliation, reason alone to purchase this work.

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*Reviewed by **Philip O. Hopkins**, Professor of Missions at Gateway Seminary in Ontario, California*