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Basil of Caesarea (329-379) offers a unique take on the church's evangelistic and social mandates. He does this by making mercy a frequent topic of his sermons and by locating compassionate action as evidence of salvation. Whereas contemporary debates tend to locate compassion as an outflow of the gospel, or as a byproduct, for Basil compassion and mercy are central to it. And rather than defining salvation as mere ascent to a set of beliefs, for Basil, salvation is evidenced perhaps especially in how one treats the poor and needy. Basil's unique blend of philosophical and rhetorical expertise along with his deep spirituality come together in a profoundly challenging fashion, providing not only a fascinating historical study, but one that exhibits remarkable relevance for the contemporary church. For instance, in his forward to Basil's On Social Justice, Gregory P. Yova observes:

> It's unbelievable how precisely he describes our modern struggle with material wealth, our responsibility to our fellow man, and how to live a life in balance. The struggle he describes is the exact struggle facing any person with a conscience. How much is enough? How far should I go to provide for my family and myself? What is my responsibility to others? Do I have to "sell everything and give it all to the poor" to make God happy? (Basil and Paul Schroeder 2009, 9-10).

The goal of this study will be not only to provide a general overview of certain key texts related to Basil's approach to both communicating the gospel and encouraging social action, but to also tease out a few applications for modern mission practice.

## Basil's Life

Born around 329, Basil lived between the councils of Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople in 381. As such, he was shaped by the former and laid the groundwork for the latter. His parents had been wealthy Cappadocian Christians, from what is the Black Sea coast of modern-day Turkey. He was born both into affluence and into a rich heritage of faith. Basil was the oldest boy of nine brothers and sisters, a tenth having died in infancy. In addition, he was five to ten years older than his brothers Gregory, who would become Bishop of Nyssa, and Peter, the future bishop of Sebastia (Basil and DelCogliano 2011, 6-7). It was his older sister, Macrina, though, named after her paternal grandmother, who was also a woman of deep faith and who perhaps most influenced not only Basil and Gregory but also the entire family to pursue an ascetic lifestyle (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 15).

Basil, whose name means royal, owed his wealth to his family's landownership, and this was largely due to the noble lineage of his mother, Emmelia whose father had been martyred for his faith (Basil and DelCogliano, 6). The family's wealth afforded Basil the opportunity to acquire a top-notch education in rhetoric and philosophy, in hopes that he would follow in his father's footsteps. His educational journey began in the region of his birth and eventually took him to Athens around 349 or 350. Basil left Athens around 355 or 356 to teach rhetoric in Caesarea. This, however, lasted only about a year before he gave up teaching in order to follow and learn from Eustathius, bishop of Sebaste, whose teachings had already influenced his mother and sister. Eustathius had been a controversial ascetic whose teachings were for a while attractive to Basil, and Basil sought him out as a mentor (Radde-Gallwitz 2012, 25). It seems likely that Basil was baptized sometime after returning from this journey, as he soon pursued an ascetic lifestyle on one of his family's properties (Basil and DelCogliano 2011, 8-9).

Prior to this, Basil's younger brother Naucratius had already embraced an ascetic lifestyle and committed to serving a community of elderly poor. Naucratius though tragically died in a hunting accident and this likely prompted Basil's return from Athens (Hildebrand 2014, 8). It was thus the three-fold influence of his sister Macrina, Eustathius of Sebaste, and his brother Naucratius that led Basil to what has been referred to as Basil's awakening—when he began to earnestly pursue a deeper devotion to God. Stephen Hildebrand calls this a moral rather than a doctrinal awakening (Ibid, 8-9). As Basil himself points out, "I was raised by Christian parents from the very first. From the womb I learned from them the sacred writings, which brought me to a

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knowledge of the truth" (Basil and Jacob N. Van Sickle 2014, 39). But this awakening represented for Basil an abandonment of worldly pursuits and a wholehearted turn to God. After seeking out Eustathius to lead him in his desired moral transformation, Basil soon discovered that the form of asceticism Eustathius advocated did not accomplish for him what he had hoped. Specifically, he concluded that the life of solitude was ineffective because "we carry indwelling disorders about with us," and through solitude we cannot escape the sins that drag us down (Basil and Jacob N. Van Sickle 2014, 10). The ineffectiveness of solitude in quelling the sinful nature would inspire in Basil a lifelong passion for the necessity and importance of community. Thus, as he moved back and forth between his retreat in Pontus and his eventual pastoral role in Caesarea between 357 and 370, he would continue to develop his approach to ascetism and to Christian communal living.

Basil was ordained against his wishes in 357 and was later made bishop of Caesarea in 370, upon the death of then Bishop Eusebius. Prior to this, Basil and Eusebius had fallen out, leading Basil to retreat again to the monastic life rather than participating in an inner-church conflict. Ultimately, Basil completely renounced his own extensive wealth, founded a monastery at an estate owned by his family, and embarked on a life of asceticism. He would eventually travel around the entire region establishing other similar monastic communities for both men and women. This chosen path ultimately "contributed to both his poor health and his reputation for spiritual greatness" (Olson 1999, 176). In fact, when he was chosen bishop of Caesarea, the only charge that his Arian opponents could make against Basil was that of poor health. To this, Basil's supporters declared that they were electing a bishop and not a gladiator (Gonzalez 1984, 184). Basil was elected bishop and would serve in that role until his death just months before the Council of Constantinople in 381 (Basil and Hildebrand 2011, 6).

Basil ranks among the Cappadocian Fathers, a group that also includes Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil's brother, Gregory of Nyssa. Basil has variously been referred to as the "Great," especially for his efforts regarding the Arian controversy (Silvas 2007, 73), and as a "light of piety" and as "luminary of the Church" (John Paul II 1981, 593). Much of his spiritual wisdom and insight has been attributed to his cenobitic, or communal form of monasticism, in which he shunned attachment to material things and engaged in serving the poor and needy by providing care for the sick and education for young people (Basil and Nonna Verna Harrison, 2005, under "Basil's Life and Work"). In fact,

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Basil's entire life and ministry would demonstrate an equal and abiding passion for both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. As Pope John Paul II has said:

> Basil's severity against heresies and tyrants was not exceeded by his severity against ambiguities and abuses within the Church: in particular, against worldliness and attachment to property. He was actuated, then as always by the same love of truth and of the Gospel. It was indeed, though in a different way, the Gospel that was always denied and contradicted: both by the error of the heretics and by the selfishness of the rich (John Paul II 1981, 599).

During Basil's life, the theological controversy set in motion by Arius and his followers would continue to wage until the issue was once again addressed and condemned at Constantinople in 381. The resolution that would come with this Second Ecumenical Council owed in part to Basil's theological contributions and to his deep-seated concern for the unity of the Church (Basil and Hildebrand 2011, 6-7). Much of what he wrote in both his major works and in his epistles reflected his twin concerns regarding the refutation of heresy and the promotion of authentic Christian living. In addition, Basil's ministry must be understood in the context of the Roman Emperor Valens, who supported the Arians and sought to rid the eastern empire of any adherents to Nicaea. Basil, however, considered the "the emperor's religion a sham maintained by force rather than genuine faith" (Raddle-Gallwitz 2012, 10). Somehow, Basil won Valens over, perhaps not theologically, but at the very least in a utilitarian sense, when the emperor and his entourage showed up at Basil's church in January of 372 (Raddle-Gallwitz 2012, 2). Basil's encounter with Valens and the events leading up to it attest to Basil's commitment to the authentic Christian life. In preparation for his visit to Caesarea, Valens had ordered local officials in Caesarea to bring Basil in line through whatever means necessary. When the praetorian prefect threatened Basil with confiscation of his property, torture, and death, Basil replied:

> All that I have that you can confiscate are these rags and a few books. Nor can you exile me, for wherever you send me, I shall be God's guest. As to tortures you should know that my body is already dead in Christ. And death would be a great boon to me, leading me sooner to God. (cited in Gonzalez 1984, 185)

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One would have expected the Emperor and his vast entourage to inspire fear as they entered Basil's church. But according to Gregory of Nazianzus, the exact opposite occurred:

> For [Valens] entered the Church attended by the whole of his train; it was the festival of the Epiphany, and the Church was crowded, and, by taking his place among the people, he made a profession of unity. The occurrence is not to be lightly passed over. Upon his entrance he was struck by the thundering roll of the Psalms, by the sea of heads of the congregation, and by the angelic rather than human order which pervaded the sanctuary and its precincts: while Basil presided over his people, standing erect, as the Scripture says of Samuel, with body and eyes and mind undisturbed, as if nothing new had happened, but fixed upon God and the sanctuary, as if, so to say, he had been a statue, while his ministers stood around him in fear and reverence. At this sight, and it was indeed a sight unparalleled, overcome by human weakness, [Valens'] eyes were affected with dimness and giddiness, his mind with dread. This was as yet unnoticed by most people. But when he had to offer the gifts at the Table of God, which he must needs do himself, since no one would, as usual, assist him, because it was uncertain whether Basil would admit him, his feelings were revealed. For he was staggering, and had not some one in the sanctuary reached out a hand to steady his tottering steps, he would have sunk to the ground in a lamentable fall. (Gregory Nazianzus, NPNF 2nd series, vol. 7, 412)

Gregory Nazianzus goes on to say that these events marked a complete reversal in the emperor's feelings toward Basil and toward the Nicene cause as a whole. Though tempting to see in this report a bit of hagiography, it remains clear that *something* happened to bring about a dramatic change in Valens's attitude toward Basil. Plus, it seems implausible that Gregory would have successfully invented such a story that could have been easily refuted by other eyewitnesses, and the risk of such an invention to his own reputation hardly seems to warrant the potential cost. So, in the end, it seems to have been Valens, the emperor, and not Basil who was subdued and made to fall in line. Not long after, Valens would call upon Basil to embark upon a missionary venture to appoint bishops in the province of Armenia.

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## Basil the Missionary

Armenia in the mid-fourth century found itself at the center of a struggle between the Roman and Persian empires. Religiously, the land was torn between the Zoroastrian influences of Iran and Christianity of the eastern Roman empire (Dumitraşcu 2018, 41). The noble leaders of the nation in fact tended to waiver back and forth between the two, depending on which empire, the Roman or Persian, seemed to have the upper hand. When the Roman Emperor Valens sent troops to the region in 370 to assert Roman dominance, the result was war between the two empires ending in the defeat of the Persians, who were forced to leave the Caucasus (Dumitraşcu 2018, 43-44). Basil was likely sent to the region in 373-374.

Basil's acceptance of Valen's commission to missionary work in Armenia probably owed to his chief strategy for churches everywhere, namely that of unity. As a monk and bishop he had placed great value on cultivating and maintaining friendships, even at long distances (Dumitraşcu 2018, 88). And he saw it as his primary calling to constantly work to bridge the gap between various social classes in the church, especially between the rich and poor. He used his extensive powers of persuasion and long cultivated friendships to implore the rich and powerful to show mercy to the vulnerable. For example:

> When writing to a preceptor or tax inspector, he took great care to highlight the status he enjoyed, reminding them respectfully that he was occupying his position by the will of God, and therefore was obliged to show love for all men and to treat them with justice and understanding, for the divine reward would surely come. (Dumitraşcu 2018, 89)

In his mission to Armenia, Basil combined religious and political objectives as he found himself entangled in controversies in both arenas. To these controversies, he brought his usual emphasis on social justice and the responsibilities of all believers to foster effective community (Holman 2004, 195-196). Ultimately, Basil's efforts in Armenia were, somewhat ironically, hampered by his association with Eustathius of Sabaste, an Armenian himself, who was suspected of neo-Arian leanings. Church leaders such as Theodotus of Nicopolis rejected Basil owing to this association and refused to cooperate in his mission to Armenia (Holman 2004, 200-201).

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## Proclaiming Mercy, Practicing Salvation

To understand Basil's approach to both mercy and salvation, two important texts will be considered, namely *On Social Justice* and *On Christian Ethics*. Together these will help us grasp the main theological motives behind Basil's work for a more compassionate Christianity as well as keys to his understanding of Christian discipleship. In this, the question posed by Demetrios J. Constantelos proves especially relevant. "How does one reconcile spiritual and theological interests with secular or society concerns?" (Constantelos 1981, 81). Indeed, this is the driving question behind much of today's evangelism-social action debate. What exactly is the church's role in society? Is it detached evangelistic fervor, or is the church's mission broader and more inclusive? Is justice related only to the actions of the church, or also to her proclamation? For Constantelos, the answer lies in the deep interconnectivity Basil held between the church's theology and practices, between worship and ethics (Constantelos 1981, 82). Basil describes this intricately woven fabric that constitutes the Christian faith in his sermons on wealth and its use which he sees as ultimately neutral and neither inherently evil nor inherently good (Constantelos 1981, 84).

For Basil these were more than lofty theological ideas. After his initial ascetic foray into the desert in 360, he would return to Caesarea and serve as a presbyter under Eusebius. When famine struck in 368, Basil led the church's relief efforts through both his preaching and selfless acts of compassion. During this time:

> He delivered a series of sermons against profiteers and against the indifferent rich, while at the same time urging all to come to the assistance of those who were suffering. He himself organized free meals for all the poor, including visiting foreigners, Christians, pagans, and Jews alike. It was during that social crisis that he dispersed the remaining portion of his paternal inheritance in order to help the poor. (Constantelos 1981, 85) 4

## On Social Justice

This text represents a series of four sermons preached by Basil, possibly around the time of the Caesarean famine. The populace in Caesarea in Basil's day was sharply divided

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between those with means and those who lived in poverty. In fact, about one third of the population were slaves:

> Free birth was a privilege in an era when personal freedom was by no means guaranteed. Many slaves were foreign captives, but residents of the empire could also lose their freedom in a variety of ways. People were sold into slaves together with their children in order to pay foreclosed debts, as Basil describes (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 17).

When Basil converted to Christianity[1], he did so with the understanding that renouncing worldly wealth and possessions constituted a prominent feature of the gospel. The seriousness with which he took his faith was also evident in his decision to be baptized immediately. This is particularly noteworthy since many in Basil's day postponed baptism until late in life, often until one's deathbed because it was widely believed that certain sins committed after baptism would not be forgiven (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 18). So, when Basil writes about social justice, he writes not as one born into poverty railing against the rich but as one born into extravagant wealth, forsaking all for the cause of the gospel.

According to Paul Schroeder, the interpretation of Jesus' instructions to the rich young man found in Matthew 19:21 "was a subject of considerable discussion in the early Church" (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 21). Clement of Alexandria in the early third century had taught that the passage was not meant to be taken literally, but rather as instruction for believers to loosen their attachment to material possessions. Later, with the rise of monasticism, as recorded in Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, a more literal reading was applied. The church in the West would come to hold both of these teachings together by claiming that the former was expected of all believers and the latter only of those desiring a deeper commitment to Christ (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 22-23). But as Schroeder rightly observes, what both of these understandings have in common is that they share a very individualistic interpretation. "Both understand the root problem as residing in [one's] relationship to wealth and worldly goods per se" (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 23-24). In contrast, Basil's understanding of this passage was far more socially oriented. This is evident in that he believed the central issue in this passage to be a "violation of the commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 24). Again, as Schroeder says, "the focus is not on the individual's

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[1] This is not to suggest that he converted from some other form of religion or from non-religion, but rather that he made a firm commitment to follow Christ and forsake all else; Radde-Gallwitz, 21.

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relationship to wealth and possessions, but rather on the fact that having great wealth while others lack daily necessities constitutes a violation of the law of love" (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 24). Basil thus seeks to "personalize and humanize the plight of the poor" (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 25). Thus, for Basil, the commandment applies to all believers and not only to some superset of Christians who evidence a deeper commitment to the things of God.

Basil also advocates what Schroeder calls an *ethic of sustainability*—the idea that God has provided for all of humanity's needs if each person would utilize only the minimal amount of resources needed for daily life and avoids excesses. If individuals will share and be equitable with what they possess, then there should exist enough resources for all to be sufficiently cared for. Therefore, in close relationship to the ethic of sustainability lies the distributive mandate, with the idea that "whatever one has that is 'extra,' over and above one's actual needs, should be given to those who have less" (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 27). As Basil states, "The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy" (Basil and Schroeder 2009, 28). Thus, when famine hit, Basil called up on the rich "who controlled the grain storehouses to sell surplus to him so that he could distribute it to the hungry" (Radde-Gallwitz 2012, 89).

Finally, Basil's social concern centers on his firm belief that God has called his people into community and forms them as social beings. "Sociability is seen not merely as a virtuous quality, but rather as a conversion to a new way of being in the world" (Basil and Schroder 2009, 9-10). Basil's social vision eventually produced the Basiliad, a sort of philanthropic organization that provided practical care for the sick and for the poor, and thereby pointed forward to the promised new heaven and new earth, wherein righteousness and justice prevail. As such, the Basiliad was both a social justice strategy and an institution, or more precisely, several institutions, run by both clergy and laymen alike. Constantelos writes:

> Basil was the first bishop, either of the Christian East or of the Christian West, who systematically organized philanthropic foundations—hospitals, hostels for poor travelers, homes for the aged, orphanages, and leprosaria; he was the first who made monasticism a redeeming social force and the Church an influential organization in several aspects of society—education, welfare, health, and Church and state relations (Constantelos 1981, 81).

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Basil's social vision flowed from his firm belief that "to love God meant to love [people]" no matter what their stature or their affliction. And this belief of his was rooted in the Johannine admonition that no one can love the invisible God who forsakes loving their visible brother (1 John 4:20). Thus, "for Basil, doctrine and canon, worship and ethics, word and behavior were inextricably woven together" (Constantelos 1981, 82).

Basil's approach to both evangelism and justice exhibits an exegetical approach to Scripture, but one that also upholds the value of non-written apostolic tradition as contained in the liturgy of the Church (Pelikan 1981, 337-360). In his apologetic works, Basil pointed out that his opponents held to the letter of Scripture but missed the Spirit's intent, as one must be spiritual in order to comprehend what the Spirit has inspired. For Basil, "the norm of Scripture was not its specific language, which varied greatly, but its 'standard of teaching,' which was expressed in many different ways. Sheer differences of linguistic usage did not of themselves indicate differences within the divine nature" (Pelikan 1981, 340). In much of Basil's argument from Scripture, he borrows from the methodological approach employed in earlier Christological controversies to make his point. So, while much of the early chapters of On the Holy Spirit for example, deal with the divine nature of the Word, or Logos, this should not be seen as disjointed from his arguments about the Spirit. If the arguments employed to establish the divinity of Jesus are sound regarding the Word, then they are also sound regarding the Spirit.

## On Christian Ethics

*On Christian Ethics*, also known also as *Morals* (Lat. *Moralia* or *Regula Morales*) served for Basil as catechesis for the church in a time when Basil considered that most believers were Christians in name only (Basil and Van Sickle 2014, 18). This text serves as a prime example of Basil's high view of Scripture and how he thought it should function in both preaching and in the area of social justice. In *Christian Ethics*, Basil's diagnosis of the church centered on inattention to the moral and ethical teachings of Scripture and on a common understanding of sin as existing on a sliding scale, whereas as long as individuals can point to others worse than themselves, they can thereby minimize their own disobedience to God's commands (Basil and Van Sickle 2014, 19). Basil's work here centers on the idea that all philosophical systems depend on a set of foundational and assumed principles. For Christians, these foundational principles are the Scriptures. Thus, the *Ethics* function as an effort, and likely the first such effort in the church that

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could rightly be called an attempt at a distinctly Christian ethics (Lehmann 1963, 35), to draw out from Scripture the guiding principles for Christian ethical and moral decision making. In this, he often distinguishes the need to discern between the literal words of Scripture and their intended meaning. For example, in proposition 5.3 in Ethics Basil says, "the proof of not having the love of Christ for one's neighbor is doing anything that harms or grieves his faith, even if the act itself is allowed by the letter of Scripture." This Basil based on Rom. 14:15, "if your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died." Therefore, moral reasoning for Christians must move beyond what Scripture permits or forbids to discern the underlying motive.[2] The goal is to discover the Christological implications for life made new and whole in the kingdom of God.

Basil's *Christian Ethics* locates him closer to the Antiochene than to the Alexandrian school of patristic exegesis. Even this, though, requires some elaboration. The traditional understanding of the two schools has been that the Alexandrian school represented especially by Origen favored allegory whereas the Antioch exegetes took a more literal approach that approximates the modern grammatical-historical approach (Hildebrand 2014, 44-45). Hildebrand has shown however that Basil, even as he railed against allegory in his *Hexaemeron* (a series of sermons on creation that Basil wrote late in life), he nevertheless never departed from his earlier practice of spiritualizing certain texts, like the Psalms for example, to tease out a Christological interpretation even when the text did not warrant such a reading (ibid., 44-57).

Important for our present discussion is that, for Basil, a Christian's journey to Christ-likeness depends on the knowledge of God's two books—Scripture and creation—with special attention given to the human self as it relates to creation. Not only was knowledge necessary but also action based on that knowledge (Hildebrand 2014, 57). This is not to imply the equality of these two books, but rather that Scripture occupies the preeminent place and makes possible a faithful and fruitful reading of both creation and the self. Basil also believes in a kind of divine-human cooperation for moral and ethical transformation that begins with the text and moves to thinking and acting in response (Basil and Van Sickle 2014, 319-20). Thus, liturgy, prayer, and Christian education formed the foundation of Basil's approach to both individual transformation and practical expressions of social justice (Constantelos 1981, 84-85).

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[2] A modern argument along these lines can be found in William J. Webb, *Slaves, Homosexuals, and Women: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2001).

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## Basil's Enduring Importance

In Basil of Caesarea we encounter a man of multiple talents. He was an effective administrator, a thoughtful theologian, and a compassionate churchman. He, perhaps as much as any other prominent figure in Church history, held together the necessity of sound doctrine and the importance of faithful obedience and commitment to Christ. For Basil there could be no dichotomy between truth and action because when biblical truth is truly apprehended it must alter one's behavior. His "conviction was that doctrine and the practical matters of Christian living are entirely inseparable from one another" (Radde-Gallwitz 2012, 148). In sum:

> Basil envisioned a gradual growth in wisdom—moving "from glory to glory"—in the discipline of a life marked by charity, justice, obedience, communion, and right belief. The creeds and summaries of faith which Basil and his contemporaries produced were, in their own estimation, mere starting points for this journey—necessary, it is true, but not to be mistaken for the vision of God to which they meagerly point. (Radde-Gallwitz 2012, 149)

After his death, Gregory of Nyssa eloquently lavished praise and adoration upon his brother in his *Encomium.* He portrayed Basil as an "equal of the apostles and martyrs." In fact, Basil "would come to be one of the first non-martyrs to merit an annual festival" (Radde-Gallwitz 2012, 144). It was further said that when he prayed, "the glow of a light came on him" (Radde-Gallwitz 2012, 144). Basil's work would later be translated into Latin, and would be referenced and studied by Augustine, Aquinas, and scores of others up to the present day.

We must be careful in seeking Basil's contemporary relevance to avoid anachronistically pulling him into controversies beyond his time (such as the modern evangelism-social action debate) or reading his context too closely into our own. That said, I think there are enduring lessons to be gleaned from Basil. First, Basil lead by example. He not only called others to generous living but demonstrated extravagantly what that looked like. For the modern missions enterprise, this should cause us to think seriously about the materialistic baggage we sometimes bring with us to the task of mission. As a Nigerian missionary to Togo once said to me, "you Americans come with all the goodies. And when we Africans try to go out as missionaries, and we don't have those things, people don't think we are real missionaries." His point clearly was that the obvious wealth which Westerners carry with them into a cross-cultural setting can

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hamper the development of indigenous missions movements. Second, Basil placed a premium on building and maintaining healthy relationships. He seems to have understood that relationships were the key to the effectiveness of the church both internally and externally and worked tirelessly to cultivate and keep those relationships. When relationships broke down, as with Eusebius, Basil withdrew from the conflict rather asserting his rights and risk bringing dishonor upon the body of Christ. The Christian community was for Basil far more important than his own dignity or well-being. It appears likely that it was this relational ability that Valens saw in Basil and that Valens knew could be useful. It was why he sent Basil to Armenia. Third, closely related to Basil's view of the importance of community, was his emphasis on social ethics. How many missionary conflicts might be avoided had we placed greater emphasis on ethical and moral development as fundamental to missionary training? How many rifts between missionaries and national churches might have never taken place if missionaries, like Basil, would chose to withdraw rather than contribute to conflict? How much easier would it be for Western missionaries especially to escape their paternalistic leanings if they were more deeply grounded in a view of salvation that held mercy, compassion, and justice as essential to living a gospel-centered life? These are the kinds of question with which Basil's works continue to confront the church in her missionary endeavors.

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The Bible opens with these words: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." At the start of the biblical witness, we learn that God is the creator, and that creativity is inherent to the nature of God. Created in God's image (Genesis 1:28), human beings are also called to the exercise of creativity. Humans do not create *ex nihilo* but are called to take the raw materials of the earth, including physical materials as well intellectual resources of the world, and refashion these in innovative and creative ways. In this regard, Nicolas Berdyaev notes that these materials are "borrowed from the world created by God" (Berdyaev 2009, 127).

This doesn't mean that the human act of creation isn't significant in its own right. Dorothy Sayers offers this example: "Though we cannot create matter, we continually, by rearrangement, create new and unique entities. A million buttons, stamped out by machine, though they may be exactly alike, are not the *same* button; with each separate act of making, an entity has appeared in the world that was not there before" (Sayers 1941, loc. 380-386).

Sayers pushes the boundaries of creativity in ways that both recognize the uniqueness of human creativity and embrace the ordinary ("stamping out buttons"), inviting the reader to deeper reflection on the scope and significance of the creative process. Further, when considered in light of God's mission in the world, the call to create takes on a new level of spiritual and missional importance. This essay will seek to expand our understanding about the importance and practice of creativity in the life and calling of the believer, communicating the reality of God's mission in and through the creative process.

## Foundations of Missio Dei, Calling, and Creativity

The mission of God (*missio Dei*) encompasses the wide scope of God's work in and for the world. God is, in God's very nature, a missional God. Not only do the writers of Scripture bear witness to God's continual acts of reaching out to creation, of redeeming and reconciling humanity, and of re-creating the world, their very lives and calling are shaped by this reality. This reality, of a God whose very nature and work are characterized by mission, continues to shape the life and calling of the believer today. We ourselves are witnesses to God's ongoing work. As the believer's life and calling are formed and reformed by God's mission, he or she communicates the realities of God's mission in both word and action.

Additionally, it is important to consider the wide scope of God's mission and work in the world. Our understanding of God's mission is shaped by the Biblical text, in which we see God's work not only in redemption, but also in the care for creation, along with the work of justice, human care, and flourishing. The implications of this are far-reaching, including how it informs the believer's calling. In recognizing the fullness of God's mission, it brings spiritual importance and significance to the ordinary work and calling of the believer, as the work itself bears witness to and communicates the reality of God's mission. For example, looking back to Dorothy Sayers' example, we might ask regarding the work of the one in the factory producing buttons, in what ways are these buttons being used to clothe humanity as a witness to God's mission of human care?

The mission of God brings shape and direction to the calling of the believer. The life lived as witness to God's mission not only embodies the truth of God's work in the world but does so in a way that is authentic to the individual uniquely created in God's image. Parker Palmer, speaking about his granddaughter, says this: "[She] did not arrive in the world as *this* kind of person rather than *that*, or *that*, or *that*. She did not show up as raw material to be shaped into whatever image the world might want her to take. She arrived with her own gifted form, with the shape of her own sacred soul. Biblical faith calls it the image of God in which we are all created" (Palmer 2000, 38). In this light, a believer's gifts, talents, skills, and creativity bring uniqueness and authenticity to his or her calling in the world.

Creativity is not only part of the identity of the one made in God's image but is also woven into his or her everyday experience. Rapid changes in the economy, especially in response to Covid-19, have heightened the urgency of developing creative practices. While there are countless resources helping people develop and foster their creativity,

there are comparatively few discussions of creativity from a theological perspective, and none, if any, which connect it directly to the mission of God. For example, two contemporary resources which seek to connect faith and work, Timothy Keller's *Every Good Endeavor*, and Quinn and Strickland's *Every Waking Hour,* make few connections to the creative process.

My essay will interact with the work of four theologians who offer a more fully developed theology of creativity, who in addition to the aforementioned Dorothy Sayers and Nicolas Berdyaev, includes two contemporary authors, Stewart Devenish, in his chapter on the "Faithful Imagination" as part of the book *Creativity and Spirituality*, and Makoto Fujimura in his book *Art and Faith*. While none of these authors discuss the *missio Dei* directly, their work as it relates to creativity offers important insights which can be contextualized in light of the mission of God. Their insights will guide us in making vital connections between creativity, calling, and the communication of God's mission in the world. Additionally, through interviews and a focus group, my essay will seek to apply these connections to the real-world life, ministry, and work of the believer.

## A Missional Approach to Creativity

Creativity is a gift from God ("Every good and perfect gift is from above" James 1:17 NIV) bestowed from the Creator into the created, so that through the creative process, the created may image the Creator in the world. The *missio Dei* encompasses God's work in the world; creative expression is an act of participation in that work. Berdyaev writes that "man is not the source of his gifts . . . he has received them from God and therefore feels that he is in God's hands and is an instrument of God's work in the world" (2009, 127). Participation in the creative process is important for the life shaped by God's mission and God's work and is itself an answer to God's call. Berdyaev further makes the connection between the gift of creativity and the call of God: "God has granted man the creative gift, the talent, the genius and also the world in and through which the creative activity is to be carried out. God calls man to perform the creative act and realize his vocation, and He is expecting an answer to His call" (2009, 128).

Further, the creative response to God's call is free. The creative life shaped by God's mission is free to live out the reality of God's mission in new, creative, and innovative ways. Berdyaev goes so far as to say that without freedom: "There can be no creative activity. Freedom not determined by anything answers God's call to creative work, but

in doing so it makes use of the gift or genius received from God and of the materials present in the created world" (Berdyaev 2009, 128). In other words, the believer whose life is shaped by the *missio Dei* can exercise his or her creativity in a variety of contexts and through a variety of means which are authentic to his or her identity as one created in God's image, and which further God's mission in the world.

Our understanding of creativity and its connection to *missio Dei* is strengthened through a discussion of the creative imagination. It is first helpful to consider that there is nothing unique about the way a believer imagines or takes part in the creative process: "What characterizes the Christian imagination from all other types of imagination is not so much that Christians adopt a different technique of imagining but that they draw from a distinct meaning-making paradigm that gives distinctive shape and direction to its range of imaginative possibilities" (Devenish 2017, 29). In other words, the believer's imagination is shaped by a paradigm which has its own distinct apparatus of meaning, "what John Calvin called *sensus divinatatis* (the sense of God)" (2017, 29). Sensing God, to utilize Calvin's language, is not some abstract exercise, but when considered in light of the *missio Dei*, takes on the reality of a God who is continually reaching out, redeeming, caring for and reconciling humanity and all of creation. In other words, the believer's imagination is shaped by the *missio Dei.*

This gives both shape and direction to the creative process for the believer. Creativity is not a directionless exercise, but a distinctively spiritual one, given life and direction by the mission of God. Devenish uses two helpful terms to talk about the spiritual paradigm through which the believer understands the world: "A *homeworld* is a habituated web of meaning that constitutes the place where a community or people normally reside . . . a *lifeworld* functions as a pregiven, perpetual web of meaning that undergirds and supports a person's or people's existence, based on a presupposed and subconscious way of being in the world" (2017, 27). Utilizing this terminology, Devenish writes that the "Christian homeworld is a world that is 'upheld' by the sense of God. It presupposes a world whose ontological foundations are grounded in the transcendent being of God himself" (2017, 29). *Missio Dei* theology invites us to take this a step further. Not only is the Christian homeworld grounded in God's being, but it also finds its life in God's continued creative and recreative work in the world.

In this way, "the creativity of the faithful imagination is much more directed and purposeful" (Devenish, 2017, 33). The believer creatively imagines and works towards a better world, a world shaped by the reality of the *missio Dei*, a place where heaven and

earth connect ("thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," Matt 6:10 KJV). Devenish uses the language of participation to describe this connection: "Redeemed humanity has access to the resources of heaven while living here on earth. Christians are able to participate in the life of heaven through prayer, the sacraments, and engagement in mission, justice and compassion" (2017, 30). A believer's calling shaped by the *missio Dei* is a calling to participate in God's work. In this way, "participation in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4 NIV) is not only connected with the being of God but is participation in the work of God in the world whose very nature is characterized by mission.

Devenish utilizes a helpful theological term, cosmicization, which can further build the heaven-earth connection as a paradigm for understanding the calling of the believer to participate in the mission of God through the creative imagination. Regarding cosmicization, he writes that "simply put, the religious community makes a habit of replicating what they know to exist in heaven by revelation, as the central axis of their human lifeworld on earth" (2017, 34). Devenish suggests that the "design of the tabernacle" stands as a Biblical image of cosmicization (2017, 34). Interestingly, Exodus 31:1-11 describes the creative talents of the artisans and designers of the tabernacle as gifts from the Spirit of God: "And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs" (Exodus 31:3-4, NIV). Not only does the tabernacle's design point to God's dwelling place among people, but the very creative process used in its design was the work of God's Spirit, connecting the creative process to God's presence and mission on the earth.

Devenish suggests that cosmicization helps bring focus to the believer's creative imagination, where "Christian creativity is not a 'free-form' hyperexpressivism that lacks a central integrating model" (2017, 34). Rather "authentic Christian expression . . . is based on the principle of cosmicization, where the structures, attitudes, and defining principles that function in the heavenly temple where God dwells in his triune nature provide the structures, attitudes, and defining principles that guide the citizens of heaven on earth in establishing the earthly version of the kingdom of God" (2017, 34). I would argue that as understood through the *missio Dei,* God's triune nature is not only understood through the lens of God's own fellowship as Trinity within the heavenly realm but recognizes that part of God's very nature is the continued work of the missional God as Trinity in and for the world. In this way, God's very nature connects heaven and earth. The believer's creative vision shaped by the *missio Dei* doesn't

establish the kingdom of heaven on earth, per se, but participates in the "structures, attitudes, and defining principles" of the work of the triune God whose mission on earth is being carried out.

We might further consider how the mission of the triune God shapes a believer's creative imagination. Devenish writes that "the faithful imagination operates in those people whose inner eye is focused on Christ as the originator of all being and all beauty" (2017, 32). Scripture has much to say about the nature and the work of Christ, including Christ as creator ("for in Him all things were created" Col 1:16 NIV). As creator, Christ is indeed the origin of everything that is good and beautiful about creation. Makoto Fujimura, in his book *Art and Faith*, considers the redemptive and restorative work of Christ as it relates to the creative process. In a chapter centered on the Japanese practice of Kintsugi, he writes that "Christ came not to 'fix' us, not just to restore, but to make us a new creation. Christ's sacrifice at Calvary means he died to take our place in receiving the death we deserve . . . Christ's 'substitutional atonement' will restore Creation and us into the right order of God" (Fujimura 2020, 45).

The work of New Creation shapes a path towards sacred creativity rooted in God's ongoing work: "The sacred role of creativity and a theology that is cast toward, and through, the New Creation in us can provide a path toward restoring imagination, as based in the sanctified realm of the Holy Spirit and as made possible by Christ's sacrifice and the Holy Spirit's gift as an invitation to co-create into the future of God" (Fujimura 2020, 21). For the believer whose life is shaped by God's mission, the act of creativity is given life by the work of the Holy Spirit, communicating the reality of God's mission in new and fresh ways. Fujimura argues that the work of the Holy Spirit gives life to the believer's creativity (he utilizes the term "making" for the ongoing creative work of the believer): "Making necessarily depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our creativity; the Holy Spirit–filled life of abundance (Galatians 5) leads us into the recovery of ourselves as makers in the image of the Creator" (2020, 52).

Fujimura recognizes that there is indeed a newness to the life made new in Christ, a life shaped by the new things God is doing in the world. This requires an intuition which is given direction by the Spirit of God: "Our creative intuition, fused with the work of the Spirit of God, can become the deepest seat of knowledge, from which our making can flow" (2020, 15). This gives space and freedom for the believer as he or she communicates the realities of New Creation and of the ongoing mission of God in fresh and innovative ways through the creative process.

Creativity which is shaped by the life and mission of the Spirit of God is also free, a connection which warrants further development. Berdyaev writes that "true creativeness is always in the Holy Spirit, for only in the Spirit can there be that union of grace and freedom which we find in creativeness" (1955, 131). This freedom is given higher purpose through the work of the Spirit, and its ongoing connection to God's mission and work. Yet, Berdyaev also raises the important consideration that the free creative process involves a level of imperfection and risk: "Creativeness is bound up with imperfection, and perfection may be unfavourable to it. This is the moral paradox with regard to creativeness" (1955, 131). This is certainly intuitive. Any creative or new ideas, whether it be the creation of a picture, a song, or a new evangelism initiative, has the possibility and likelihood of a number of failures in the process until the finished work or project is completed. Berdyaev is suggesting that this failure and risk is not a problem of the creative process to be fixed but is necessary to it. Freedom of necessity involves risk and failure. But it is precisely through the process of mistakes, learning, failure, and risk that the creative process produces its most beautiful expressions of God's mission and work.

Fujimura makes the interesting theological connection to the wounds of Christ: "The resurrected Christ still bears the wounds of the crucifixion. Through these sacred wounds a new world is born; through the revealing of the wounds still imbedded in the new body of Christ, our faith is given" (2020, 45). Through Christ's wounds, the most beautiful expression of God's love for the world was and continues to be visibly demonstrated. Likewise, the apparent "brokenness" of the human creative process comes with it the promise of something new and greater.

The creative imagination shaped by God's mission has its focus on something new, what Fujimura terms a "New Newness": "Resurrection reality surpasses our own future redemption, but it presents the possibility of our present capacity to create *kainos*, New Newness, for heaven to invade the earth" (2020, 140). Devenish describes the creative imagination shaped by the kingdom as without limitation: "Despite the fact that our physical, earthly lives are characterized by prescribed limits—mortality, knowledge, strength, entropy, and goodness—those who are engaged in the practice of the spiritual life have no such awareness of limitation . . . the spiritual life [is] a life that is essentially without limits" (2017, 31). The creative imagination shaped by the mission of God has in its purview the full scope of New Creation, for which there are no limitations.

It is important to consider, in this light, that the movement of the creative imagination into New Newness can also lead one to a point of frustration, especially if the enacted reality does not meet the reality of the creative imagination. Berdyaev describes what is sometimes the stark reality of this process: "The aim of creative inspiration is to bring forth new forms of life, but the results are the cold products of civilization, cultural values, books, pictures, institutions, good works. Good works mean the cooling down of the creative fire of love in the human heart just as a philosophical book means the cooling down of the creative fire of knowledge in the human spirit" (1955, 129). He goes on to write that "the inner creative act in its fiery impetus ought to leave the heaviness of the world behind and 'overcome the world.' But in its external realization the creative act is subject to the power 'of the world' and is fettered by it" (1955, 129).

This is a very practical consideration offered by Berdyaev. It can be seen in the creative vision of a pastor for example, being refashioned in light of real life factors by the church's elders. Or it can be seen in the tension between the visionaries and the managers in a business. From a theological perspective, it demonstrates the tension between the eschatological vision of the New Creation, and the present reality of the world. And yet, despite this frustration, the calling shaped by God's mission to imagine a creative vision of New Creation is not in vain. God's mission is much bigger than any of our individual participation, and creative vision by necessity supersedes human limitations to imagine and see the ongoing work of God. The creative work that is actualized is not in vain either, even if it is a limited expression of a limitless mission of God and a limitless vision of New Creation. It may be a seed, a starting point, but when done in light of God's mission, the creative process will bear fruit for the Kingdom.

We can also consider the creative process itself as a window into the trinitarian mission of God. Dorothy Sayers offers a theologically rich, yet practical window into the creative process. Quoting the character St. Michael from her play *The Zeal of Thy House*, Sayers writes:

> For every work . . . of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly. First . . . there is the Creative Idea, passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning: and this is the image of the Father. Second, there is the Creative Energy [or Activity] begotten of that idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter: and this is the image of the Word. Third, there is the Creative Power, the

meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul: and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit. And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without other: and this is the image of the Trinity (1941, loc. 471-578).

Sayers suggests a close connection between the creative process, and God's being and work as Trinity. As the believer engages in her giftedness and the process of creativity, she images the being and work of the triune God. This illustration of the creative process has practical implications for the believer who seeks to communicate the reality of God's mission through participation in God's work of New Creation. Consider, as an example, the process of writing a song for worship. This is not to exclude ways of making which are not explicitly Christian or those outside of the traditional creative arts, as the calling of participation in God's mission encompasses all of life, but simply to offer an illustration. One might imagine what the finished song would look and sound like, how its musical elements would flow together into a whole. There would also be consideration of the process involved in writing and creating the song, the work, the mistakes, the failure and successes that move it towards the finished artwork. Finally, the songwriter might consider how it might, through its melody and words, communicate the beauty and reality of the New Creation, and communicate the truth of God's mission, bringing meaning and renewal to both its writer and those who participate in its singing and melody. The application of this process can go as far as the creative imagination itself will take us.

This essay has considered an in-depth analysis of creativity from a missional and theological perspective, particularly centered on the mission of God. The creative process, as lived out by the one whose life and calling are shaped by God's mission, communicates the reality of the New Creation, and God's ongoing work in the world. What might this look like in the practical life and ministry of the believer? This essay will conclude with three practical examples, considered in light of two interviews and a small focus group. It will look at creativity from the perspective of an evangelical mission organization focused on evangelism, a retiree in his life and work, and through the creative art of photography, as seen through the eyes of a group of high school seniors.

# Creativity: New Avenues for Evangelism Ministry

I had the opportunity to speak with Mark Appleton, Director of Internet Evangelism at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Our interview took place on February 24, 2021. The goal of our conversation was to better understand the role creativity plays in the work of evangelism through a digital platform. Through our discussion, what emerged is that creativity played a key role in opening up the space for the message of the gospel to be effectively communicated. The core message of the gospel remains the same, but the means of communicating it, including a form of "digital contextualization," must be responsive to current needs.

In Mark's work, he takes an "all in" approach to finding creative ways to communicate the gospel message, referencing part of BGEA's mission statement to "use every effective means possible." Elaborating on this idea, Mark says that "I think creativity is important in gospel mission to utilize different strategies that are available to communicate the gospel." He notes further that "creativity is not just doing things the same way but creating new methods that will connect to people in new ways so that the gospel goes forth." Here we see an interplay between the "new" and the "old." While the gospel message is timeless, God has endowed us with the creativity to communicate this message in new and fresh ways.

Creativity must also be responsive to contextual concerns. There is likely no larger recent contextual challenge than Covid-19. In response to the question, *how have you reimagined ministry in response to Covid-19*, Mark says:

> For internet evangelism, we were a little bit unique in that we are already positioned in a place where everyone was suddenly driven to. For 8 years, we had already been trying to leverage digital technology to connect to people and introduce them to the gospel. That particular ministry was suddenly just needed more. What changed there was the opportunity to appeal to that particular burden of culture. The strategy didn't change in that respect.

Where other work environments and ministries had to change and adapt to continue operating, Mark's team had to adapt to an immediate increase in demand (around 20-25% increase in online traffic). The number of volunteers in their ministry surged from 1000 to 1500 in a short period of time. This opened up a great opportunity for people to serve during a time of crisis: "We didn't do any extra recruiting campaigns.

Literally, surges of people started expressing interest. I think it was because there weren't other outlets to serve. And people who had missional hearts who wanted to reach out, their typical outreach was their mission trips and different things were shut down."

For BGEA as a whole, "an organization that was built on gathering people in stadiums and presenting the gospel, certainly some shifts had to go on there," Mark noted. One of the ways BGEA responded was through the creation of a 24-hour prayer line. Mark describes it this way: "The organization spun up a 24-hour prayer line very quickly last year that received thousands of calls throughout the year, so that was another pivot. Not necessarily new technology, but we couldn't do what we typically do, so rather than do nothing, let's come up with a way to still reach people." Again, we see the way that creativity comes with a commitment to communicate the same gospel message in new and fresh ways in response to current needs.

Mark also spoke about the importance of contextualizing the content in his ministry. He says that "creativity is not just doing things the same way but creating new methods that will connect to people in new ways so that the gospel goes forth." He further explains how "visual creativity and creativity in messaging is important for gospel proclamation as well, because people have different interests, so we want to draw people to the gospel who have different interests, and different things that appeal to them." This demonstrates the important role that creativity plays in contextualization and effective gospel communication.

Elaborating further, Mark describes the role of contextualization in a specific initiative his team leads: "We have an outreach in Arabic that reaches into the Middle East. We've built up a Facebook page there that's [reaching] Muslim background Arabic speakers in a particular country in the Middle East." Creative contextualization plays an important part in this ministry. Mark reflects that "it's hard when you put up Christian content online to not have all the Christians flock to the content. When we're trying to do evangelism, we actually wanted a space where Muslims were comfortable coming." While the content was Christian, Mark's team did not want only Christians engaging with it: "We wanted [to connect] with Muslims. [We had to] very carefully craft the content to appeal to curious and seeking Muslims. [This included] different videos and visuals that were made regionally in the context of the region, by people in the region, so it didn't seem like another western group doing something in the Middle East."

The initiative was successful, with "almost 300,000 followers in just a few years." One specific strategy utilized was "marketing personas," which Mark describes as "creating a picture of the person we're trying to reach and having that person in mind—what would they think about, care about, and want to talk about, and creating content that would engage them and lead them to spiritual conversations about the gospel." Ultimately, the goal is for people to reach out for personal conversations, as "all of the posts invite people to engage, message, and talk to one of our trained coaches." This has been successful, leading to hundreds of weekly conversations. This speaks to the importance, especially within digital platforms, of creativity which leads to personal, human to human connections.

Finally, Mark talked about the importance of God's sovereignty, and the limitations of our own creative efforts: "It's a false hope to think that I can just work hard enough to make the kingdom of God come about." There is a tension between working with urgency, and also experiencing peace and contentment "knowing that it doesn't depend on us." God's mission will go forward, and while we have an important part to play, we rest in knowing that God's work doesn't ultimately depend on us.

My interview with Mark Appleton highlighted the importance of creativity in gospel and evangelism ministry. The creative work begins with a commitment to reaching people with the message of the gospel in relevant and personal ways. It continues with the freedom to explore the creative process in new ways, within the context of doing whatever it takes to proclaim the gospel message. Finally, we remember that we can rest in the knowledge that God's mission will continue to go forward.

## "God's Creative Expression": Interview with Dr. Kevin Smith

I also had an opportunity to speak with Dr. Kevin Smith about his reflections on creativity from a theological perspective, as well as how creativity shapes his own experience as a semi-retired person. Our conversation took place on March 11, 2021. Kevin Smith holds a doctorate in theology, and his thesis focused in the area of biblical hermeneutics. Two things stood out from our discussion. The first was the creative adaptation Kevin maneuvered through in his life and work as a result of Covid-19. Additionally, there is a theological thread which runs through Kevin's reflections and experience which ties creativity to our own unique expression.

When the country went on lockdown due to Covid-19, Kevin was a long-term substitute teaching at Carmel Christian School in Charlotte. Right in the middle of his

assignment, "[the job at Carmel suddenly] ended. Because of the immediate movement to online, the teacher I was subbing for, she picked that right up from home." Suddenly without work, "we had to make a lot of adjustments, and the Lord eventually after a period of time, opened a door for me at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association." He also found new opportunities to preach on the weekend ("something I thoroughly enjoy"). "In God's leading and His patient timing, the Lord has opened good doors." Kevin was able to creatively adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, while trusting in God's timing. While creativity is sometimes freely exercised in the context of stability and a life at peace, Kevin's story reminds us that other times, creativity is just as essential in situations where life and vocation are in flux.

Within the context of his work at BGEA, Kevin has found many opportunities to exercise creativity. Interestingly, Kevin works part time in the same division as Mark Appleton. Kevin describes the work that he does this way: "Part of what I do is researching these new testimonies, and it's been an incredible blessing to develop a way to find them then represent them to the departments who can share those in a wide way for the edifying of the body." Additionally, his department helps facilitate BGEA's "online, free discipleship courses. As part of those courses, volunteer coaches interact with those who take those courses when they would like guidance and help. In those interactions, we gain the testimonies that are coming in." Through the rapid life-changes brought about by Covid-19, Kevin was able to find an opportunity at BGEA that he may never have pursued otherwise, and within that role, has been able to creatively discover and communicate people's testimonies and stories for the furtherance of the gospel.

Additionally, there was a common thread which ran through our discussions, and also has helped to shape Kevin's calling and experience. When asked if creativity is part of a Christian's calling, Kevin notes that "we as believers in Jesus Christ, those who have been raised to life in Christ, we are his own special creative work of grace; it's the very framework of who we are in Christ: God's creative expression." He reflects further that "their own unique personality and all that they are [is] integrated automatically into that creative design." He suggests that the simple writing of a letter "would be a unique expression. I couldn't reproduce it. Nobody else could. That would be your unique way of reaching into another life."

Kevin also reflects on how someone can discover this unique creative expression. A key passage for him is I Corinthians 12, which includes "the gifts of the Spirit and the sovereign placement by the Spirit of people within the body to edify it." He believes this

discovery of spiritual gifts often happens within "organic working of a local church, with someone who has the gift of teaching, knowledge, helps, or mercy. As they are in this actual living connection with people in whom those gifts are being evidenced, I think God will often use that to stir within that individual's heart, 'hey, I think I can do that.'" Kevin further emphasizes the importance of relationships in the process of discovering creative gifts: "We're in that living bond with someone, knowing that we have that creative input. Without that people can get discouraged in a hurry." Here, Kevin emphasizes the importance of community in discovering one's creative gifts.

Kevin also makes the important point that gifts and talents are not just those utilized or discovered in the local church context. Regarding the use of gifts within the "church scattered," Kevin reflects that "the Lord . . . is going to be ahead of us there. We don't put a separation between the secular and the sacred. If God is calling me and He's gifting me, some expression of that ability can be just as effective in a vocational job as it would be within an office in the body of Christ." He goes on to tell the story of his brother-in-law whose creative gifts are in the area of engineering and mechanics. Kevin says that "[my brother-in-law] went [to Guatemala] with his wife to be a part of an outreach ministry of a home for very needy children." Within this ministry, his creative gifts of engineering have opened up doors for sharing life and faith with others: "It's been fascinating to see how, though he's not a teacher per se in the official sense of the word, yet he has discipled so many within the context of the construction projects at the children's home where they are, and the ministry. It's wonderful to see how the Holy Spirit had just the place for him, in the very medium of his gifts and talents." I would add that not only did his creative gift of engineering open up opportunities for discipleship, but the gift itself has been used as a conduit to take part in God's care for the world through the art of engineering and construction.

I asked Kevin where he finds his own unique expression. He says that "lifelong, it's been opening the Scriptures in a pulpit setting in both teaching and preaching. It's where my heart has always been. And it's where I'm the most comfortable." He has found many opportunities to share God's Word with congregations on Sundays, and, in particular, notes that "one of my favorite things is to work in, help, and encourage smaller ministries." Kevin's experience demonstrates the importance of finding that unique creative expression which brings one joy in and through their work and calling as participants in God's mission.

Finally, I asked Kevin what the biggest challenge is in his life and work to which he replied: "With God's help, allowing myself to be imaginative, to not be afraid to be

expressive in the way that God has given me." Here, Kevin expresses his desire to exercise his "sacred imagination" in a way that is unique to him. What holds us back from imagining? Kevin believes that "we are also tempted to mimic others, to feel that others are successful and impactful, and [to think], if I don't do it their way, I'm not going to be used, I won't be effective. But then the Lord will calm my heart and say 'Kevin, I made you, you. And if I'll just let myself be imaginative, then a lot of good things can happen.'" This is a lesson that he passes on to his students, and others: "I try to encourage students to [remember that] God has you to be a very special means of His expression. And let Him do that and be imaginative. Don't be afraid."

My conversation with Kevin Smith points to two key realities about the creative process. First, our creative expression is often needed in response to both small and life altering changes, and that this exercise of creativity can often open new doors we may not have thought possible. Additionally, our understanding of creativity is shaped by our identity as God's "unique expression of grace." Discovering our own uniqueness is key to developing and using the creative process as part of our own unique calling shaped by God's mission, allowing each of us to uniquely communicate God's character and mission in our life and calling.

## Photography, Creativity, and the Mission of God

Photography is a rather new creative art in the history of the world, digital photography even newer. In this way, photography truly encompasses and has a unique ability to communicate a "New Newness." Photography communicates the beauty and flourishing, as well as the hurt and brokenness of the human and non-human created world. I, myself, have been drawn to this unique creative art.

The school where I teach, Walnut Grove Christian School, hosts a yearlong senior photography class. As I teach Bible to this particular group of students, I conducted a small focus group of five students who are part of the photography class. The conversation took place on Tuesday, March 9, 2021. The goal was to better understand how these students both understand and practice the creative art of photography, and how they connect it to their faith. These conversations also offered unique insights into creativity as an expression of God's mission.

My first observation from our focus group was the attention to time and detail students offered regarding both the process of photography and the creative art itself. For example, Liam says, "I took a picture of this green tree, [and used the] settings to

get a nice background." Liam also mentioned that portraits are his favorite photography type because it "allows you to capture more colors at a wider angle." Liam captures the importance of process, including color and camera settings, in crafting the best photograph possible.

As a whole, the students seemed to find attention to time and detail to be the most difficult aspect of photography as well. When asked what they find most challenging, Abigail mentioned "patience," Carson mentioned "taking the picture," while others mentioned "waiting for the right moment" (Liam) and "taking the picture" (Carson). All of these responses point to the reality that photography specifically and the creative process more broadly requires time, patience, and attention. It is also a reminder of the time, and attention to detail *the* Creator placed into the world and of God's continued patient creative work of New Creation.

In their discussions about photography, the students also demonstrated a commonsense appreciation for beauty. When asked what they enjoy most about photography, Addison and Liam mentioned "[capturing] beautiful moments" and "[capturing] pretty colors." When asked why "animals" was his favorite type of photography, Carson said simply, "because they're pretty." Along similar lines, Abigail described her favorite photography as "any picture with a sunset or sunrise" because "it's pretty." Again, demonstrating his attention to detail, Liam said that "when the sun was setting in that tree, it showed me how beautiful God's creation can be." This simple attention to artistry calls the believer to pause, reflect and appreciate the beauty and goodness of God's creation as communicated through the creative process of photography.

Throughout our conversation, the students reflected on how the creative art of photography communicates God's being, character, and presence. Carson reflected that photography "shows the brilliance of God's nature" and helps him connect to God by "[capturing] a glimpse of God's creation." Others felt that photography connected them to God through "[seeing] the presence of God" (Abigail) and "capturing God's creation" (Mia). In this way, the creative art of photography communicates the imminence of God, that the eternal God would be present with humanity in and through the beauty of God's own creation.

Two students also reflected on how photography connects to God's character. Abigail noted that photography demonstrates God's "beauty." For Carson, photography reflects "God's power." When asked to elaborate, Carson says, "[God's power to create

demonstrates] the way He can do that, and that we can't just create something out of nothing." Abigail's response emphasizes again the connection between the creative arts and an appreciation for the beauty of God's character. Carson's response reiterates an important theological point, that the way God's creates ("out of nothing") is fundamentally different from the way human creativity operates (taking the materials that God has already created and refashioning them).

Two students talked about photography as a means to capture memories. Abigail said, "you can look back at memories through pictures" and Elana discussed "capturing [a picture] through the lens that you're seeing. After you capture it, it becomes a memory." Memory is an important concept in Scripture ("I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago" Ps 77:11 NIV), especially remembering God's blessings and work in our lives. As discussed by these students, the creative art of photography has the unique ability to "capture" God's blessings of family, relationships, and experiences visually.

Throughout our discussions, this group of students also demonstrated a distinctly missional or outward purpose to the creative art of photography. Addison noted that through photography, "you can share God's creation." The students mentioned several ways photography can accomplish this. Abigail noted how photography can highlight human diversity: "Through different cultures, you can see how God made everyone different." Photography can also draw attention to an important person. Addison mentioned her favorite photograph being one of Kobe Bryant because "it shows his significance." For Liam, photography is "a way to bring joy to people's lives." Referencing his earlier discussion about the sun set in the tree demonstrating the beauty of God's creation, Liam noted that "it can help improve a person's mood. If they're feeling down, it can help a person feel happy." Addison also suggested an evangelistic purpose in that photography can be used to "record people's testimonies." For Carson, modern technology ("social media") offers enhanced means to share photography. All of their responses point to an outward or missional trajectory to the creative art of photography, all as part of God's mission. Whether sharing the beauty of God's creation or sharing a testimony, photography is uniquely positioned to communicate the truth of God's continued mission in and for the world.

Finally, the students offered a caution about photography, which speaks to the limitation of human creativity. Isaac, who is not particularly drawn to photography, stated that "I don't like [photography] because we don't need to do it." Addison

commented that "God created this whole world for us to see; but photography is man-made, so it's not technically God's world." Additionally, Abigail said this: "Taking pictures can take you away from living in the moment. If you see a monkey swinging from a vine, you might miss it because you're trying to get the perfect picture, and you might not enjoy living in the moment and seeing that happen. You might miss the monkey." These reflections rightly point out that photography is not a substitute for the in-person reality and experience of God's creation. In other words, while our creativity can capture God's world in some sense, it cannot capture the fullness of God's creative work.

As a creative art, photography has a unique ability to communicate the reality of God's nature, character, and mission. The photographs themselves capture the beauty and power of God's nature as demonstrated in creation. They also demonstrate the human art of visually characterizing God's creation in unique ways. Photography can also be a missional art in that it can be used as an encouragement to others and a way to visually exclaim the greatness of God.

## Conclusion

Concluding his book on creativity, Fujimura offers this calling to believers: "May we steward well what the Creator King has given us and accept God's invitation to sanctify our imagination and creativity, even as we labor hard on this side of eternity" (2020, 150). The call to creativity is shaped by and shapes who we are, "our unique expression," as Kevin Smith puts it. It is also shaped by God's continued work and mission of New Creation in the world; in other words, the creative process is drawn into the mission of God. In exercising creativity, the believer communicates not only the nature and character of God, but of God's continued mission and work in and for the world.

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# Communicating the Gospel: How Much Knowledge of Jesus Is Enough Knowledge for Salvation?

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## LARRY W. CALDWELL

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Let me begin with the following case study based on a true story:

> You are a Christian missionary living in a Muslim country that is very hostile to Christianity. You have been a friend of Mansour Ali for two years now. Mansour is a devout Muslim living in that country who comes from a very devout Muslim family. As you sip coffee together during one of your weekly conversations in a street-side cafe, Mansour tells you that he has recently had a dream wherein he had an encounter with Jesus. As a result, he has now decided to follow Jesus. Knowing that you also follow Jesus, Mansour asks you what he should do now. How do you respond?

Is making this declaration of his decision to follow Jesus enough to ensure that Mansour will be with Jesus in heaven some day? Certainly, only God knows the answer to this question. Nevertheless, is there not more essential knowledge about Jesus that Mansour will need to know for his decision to be a credible salvation decision? I daresay that many of us, just to be on the safe side, would feel more confident with Mansour's decision if he were to say, memorize the Nicene Creed, or carefully study the Lausanne Covenant, just to make sure that he really knew all the various theological components that deciding to follow Jesus really entails. Of course, I am being facetious here. However, this response does reflect, does it not, our natural tendency to shape followers of Jesus into our own image—or our denomination's or mission's image—and to have new followers of Jesus also believe the same theology that we believe about Jesus. Just to be safe. After all, it is Mansour's eternal destiny that is at stake, and our motivation is to make sure that he knows enough basic knowledge about Jesus so that his decision to follow Jesus is indeed a credible salvation decision.

In the 1940s the United States Food and Nutrition Board created the RDA—or "Recommended Dietary Allowance"—to help determine the level of nutrient intake that would sufficiently meet the nutritional needs for producing healthy Americans. If we

were to apply that same recommendation to evangelism efforts today—a "Recommended *Salvation* Allowance"—what would the level of "Jesus knowledge" intake need to be to sufficiently meet the salvation decision-making needs for heaven-bound individuals? While this question might look rather simplistic at first glance, it is an immense question facing evangelicals today, especially considering the challenges that "insider movements" continue to bring to Christendom (see Lewis 2007, 75). The question of how much basic knowledge of Jesus is necessary arises directly out of my own ministry where I have had the privilege of training hundreds of front-line evangelists and church planters who are working in Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist contexts.

While readily acknowledging the limitations that a mere article on such a subject necessitates, nevertheless sufficient analysis will be made to offer up at least some preliminary answers to the level of Jesus knowledge intake needed for a Recommended Salvation Allowance. The article will begin with a brief overview of a few evangelical writers who have written about salvation but have not addressed the question of minimums. Following this overview, since salvation is linked directly to the theological concept of conversion, the article will continue with a brief analysis of conversion in the book of Acts in order to arrive at a basic biblical understanding of the minimal amount of Jesus knowledge required for salvation. Acts has been selected because of the diversity of the conversions found there as well as the different cultural contexts in which those conversions take place. This analysis will be followed by an examination of the act of conversion itself—as point, process or some combination thereof—and how one's understanding of conversion may influence views concerning the amount of Jesus knowledge required for salvation. Finally, based on the preceding analysis, some of the basic Jesus knowledge elements that are necessary for a Recommended Salvation Allowance will be put forth.

## Why We Need to Understand the Minimums

Evangelicals readily agree that Jesus is the only way to salvation; that there is "no other name" by which we are saved (Acts 4:12). What is not so clear is how much basic knowledge of Jesus is necessary in an individual's life to ensure that a salvation decision truly occurs. Reducing the question to one of basic Jesus knowledge is not reductionism; in other words, it is not reducing the gospel to the lowest common denominator for salvation. Rather, it is an honest attempt to wrestle with the minimums to build upon foundational fledgling faith and help new followers of Jesus become faithful disciples.

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Surprisingly, the question of basic Jesus knowledge is a question that few evangelicals have answered (see Coleman, 1963; Abraham, 1989; Peace, 1999; Chilcote and Warner, 2008; Piper, 2009; Adeney, 2010; Rommen, 2010; Smith, 2010; Payne, 2011; Davis, 2015; and Teasdale, 2016). Below are a few representative samples of some who have talked about salvation but have not described the minimums.

In his excellent book, *Finally Alive*, pastor and scholar John Piper gives a good biblical explanation on what it means to be born again. But as is true for most books concerning evangelism and conversion, very little discussion is given by Piper as to the necessary minimum salvation knowledge of Jesus that an individual needs to have to indeed be born again. He does say this:

> There is no spiritual life—no eternal life—apart from connection with Jesus and belief in Jesus . . . What happens in the new birth is the supernatural creation of new spiritual life, and it is created through union with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit brings us into vital connection with Christ who is the way, the truth, and the life. That is the objective reality of what happens in the new birth (Piper 2009, 323).

But even with this true explanation of the new birth questions arise: How much knowledge of Jesus is necessary to have both a connection with Jesus and a belief in Jesus? How much knowledge of Jesus is enough knowledge so that the Holy Spirit brings a person into a vital connection with Jesus? And just what is the content of that salvation knowledge? Piper is not alone in his silence on these important questions.

The late missiologist David Hesselgrave believed that there are four biblical doctrines that are of central importance for the one sharing the gospel, in this case while engaged in planting churches in a cross-cultural situation:

1. God: Creator and Sustainer of the universe, God is a personal being who has will, is moral and holy, reveals himself to humans, demands worship, condemns idolatry . . .

2. Humans: Created by God in his image, humans are fallen creatures yet the objects of God's redeeming love . . .

3. Jesus Christ: Preexistent and both fully God and fully human, Jesus underwent incarnation and as the Lamb of God gave himself over to substitutionary death . . .

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4. Sin: Rebellion against God's will, sin is true moral guilt entailing judgment and resulting in estrangement and death . . . (Hesselgrave 2000, 163).

Hesselgrave is correct in his view that these doctrines are indeed of central importance. However, is the understanding of all this excellent doctrinal content necessary for an individual to truly become a follower of Jesus? On this Hesselgrave is silent.

Evangelism professor Richard Peace promotes the position that the apostle Paul's conversion experience (Acts 28) is a model for all conversions. Peace sees three core elements to Paul's (and other's) conversion experience:

1.  Insight, which involves seeking the truth (repentance);

2.  Turning from and turning to, based upon conditions occurring in the insight stage that facilitates or enables the turning to take place; and

3.  Transformation, which is the outcome of the turning and results in doing deeds consistent with repentance (Peace 1999, 37).

Peace's model gives a simple answer to the complexity that is conversion. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate more fully on what the necessary truth elements are for the insight necessary "to turn from and turn to."

Bible scholar and mission strategist Rick Brown (2000) has come closest in attempting to answer the question posed in this article in his own seminal article, "What Must One Believe about Jesus for Salvation?" Brown asks the question, "What does a person need to minimally believe about Jesus in order to be saved?" and goes on to describe beliefs that are both necessary and unnecessary for saving faith based on Scripture passages that exemplify sufficient as well as insufficient faith in Jesus. Brown concludes his article:

> It could be said that the gospel's message concerning getting saved is very simple and does not require one to have a great depth of theological understanding. That may come afterwards, but it is not a prerequisite for salvation. What is required is simply to put one's faith personally in *Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah,* meaning *one's Lord and Savior* [his italics]. Saving faith, in both its prepositional and relational aspects, is simply saying "Yes" to Jesus. After that there can be growth in the Christian life and understanding (Brown 2000, 21).

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While Brown does an excellent job handling the biblical evidence, I feel he adds a bit too much to the amount of knowledge of Jesus that is necessary for salvation especially understanding that Jesus is Messiah and is Savior. However, his article is unique in its attempt to answer the question of how much knowledge is enough knowledge.

These examples are not attempts at a straw man approach to the issue of the amount of Jesus knowledge necessary for salvation. Most of these writers, except for Brown, were not attempting to address this specific issue. However, the fact that it was a non-issue for most of them does illustrate the reality that the minimum requirements for a salvation decision are rarely addressed by those who write about conversion. But what about the Bible? Are there any indications in Scripture concerning the minimums? Here a closer look at the book of Acts is helpful.

## Conversion and "Jesus Knowledge" in the Book of Acts

The book of Acts contains over twenty references to individuals and groups who became followers of Jesus and/or references that relate to what is needed to become a Jesus follower. These references are found on the next page in Figure 1. Given space constraints, I have not included the entire context of these passages.

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Figure 1: Conversion in the Book of Acts

| 2:21 | "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2:38 | "repent and be baptized" |
| 3:17 | "repent and turn to God" |
| 5:32 | "those who obey him" are given the Holy Spirit |
| 8:12 | believe "the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" |
| 8:34-38 | after being told of "the good news about Jesus" the eunuch was baptized |
| 9:5 | "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. |
| 9:27 | Barnabas "told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him" |
| 9:42 | "many people believed in the Lord" |
| 10:43 | "everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." |
| 13:12 | after seeing everything that had happened the proconsul "believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord" |
| 13:39 | "through him everyone who believes is justified" |
| 13:48 | the Gentiles "honored the word of the Lord" and "believed" |
| 14:1 | "a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed" |
| 15:19 | Gentiles "are turning to God" |
| 16:14 | "The Lord opened her (the slave girl's) heart to respond to Paul's message." |
| 16:31 | Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household" |
| 17:4 | some of the Jews "were persuaded" that Jesus "is the Christ" |
| 17:12 | "Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of … Greek women and … men" |
| 17:34 | "A few men became followers of Paul and believed" |
| 18:8 | "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed" |
| 19:1 | "believe … in Jesus" |
| 21:20 | "many thousands of Jews have believed" |

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Notice that some of these converts had much previous foundational understanding of Judaism and the Jewish religion while others were fully pagan with no such foundations. Note, too, that there were various ways that these individuals became converts, from "calling upon the name of the Lord," to "repenting," to "obeying," to "turning to," to "opening" their heart and responding, to being "persuaded." However, far and away the primary word used to describe what happened to these individuals—in over half the examples—had something to do with the word "believe." And, interestingly, such belief was not linked to a certain amount of knowledge.

From these Acts passages we can make two preliminary conclusions. First, there are many ways that people became followers of Jesus in the book of Acts, but the primary way was to simply *believe in Jesus.* Second, while we have more information about some of the conversion events in the book of Acts—for example, Paul's own conversion experience (Acts 9, 22, 26), the conversion of Cornelius and many with him (Acts 10), and those who were converted after Paul spoke at the Areopagus (Acts 17)—for the most part there was not always a lot of foundational theological information (Jesus knowledge) given about Jesus prior to the conversion decisions. Often these conversions occur after either a sermon and/or after a miraculous event. However, if there is content given in the particular Acts passage, it is not necessarily the content that Luke is stressing; rather, the main point is that these individuals followed Jesus in a variety of ways.

This oftentimes minimal Jesus knowledge, as found in Acts, should make us wonder about the Recommended Salvation Allowance that evangelicals usually feel is necessary for a truly salvation decision for Jesus. How much Jesus knowledge we demand is often tied into our basic understanding of what conversion is in the first place. Is conversion a point, a process, or some combination of the two? The answer to this question directly influences the amount and type of Jesus knowledge that is dispensed.

## Conversion as Point and/or Process and Implications for the Question of Jesus Knowledge

Peace succinctly summarizes the typical evangelical view of conversion:

> Within the evangelical world, conversion is a defining emphasis. One cannot be considered a Christian unless one has been converted—and the more like Paul's Damascus road experience, the better. This kind of

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conversion is a sudden, punctiliar event, triggered by an encounter of some sort (with truth, with Jesus, with conviction of sin, with the plan of salvation, etc.) that marks the beginning point of the Christian life.

The strength of this perspective is its simplicity and functionality. Salvation becomes a matter of believing certain doctrines, trusting Jesus for forgiveness, and praying a prayer of commitment. Conversion is an individual experience that can be dated exactly. This view of conversion also provides laypeople with a concrete way by which to be witnesses for Jesus. They simply need to memorize a "plan of salvation" and share it with others. It is all quite well organized, simple, specific, and understandable (Peace 2004, 8).

As a good evangelical I personally can point to the exact day, date and time when I—as an eleven-year-old—accepted Jesus into my heart during evangelistic services held at my local church. Though I had a fair bit of prior Jesus knowledge it was more the knowledge I had of my own sinfulness that convinced me to make the decision for Jesus at that particular point of time in my life. The evangelist's many references to hell that morning did not hurt either!

Various evangelical approaches to conversion—like the Four Spiritual Laws, Evangelism Explosion, and the Romans Road—all desire similar point-in-time responses to Jesus with various amounts of Jesus knowledge as a part of the approach. As a result, it is often easy to view conversion as a point—here and now with little regard for either God's previous workings in the individual's life, religion, or culture. And if conversion is primarily a point, then there is little need for content, just enough content to get the person to respond, to convert. But should we really limit ourselves to the conversion as point concept? Perhaps we would do well to review our choices when answering the question, *What Is Conversion?* as seen in Figure 2 (see further Caldwell 2010).

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Figure 2: What Is Conversion?

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Point | ● |
| 1. Process + Point | ————————————————→ ● |
| 1. Point + Process | ● ————————————————→ |
| 1. Process | ————————————————→ |
| 1. Process + Point + Process | ———→ ● ———→ |
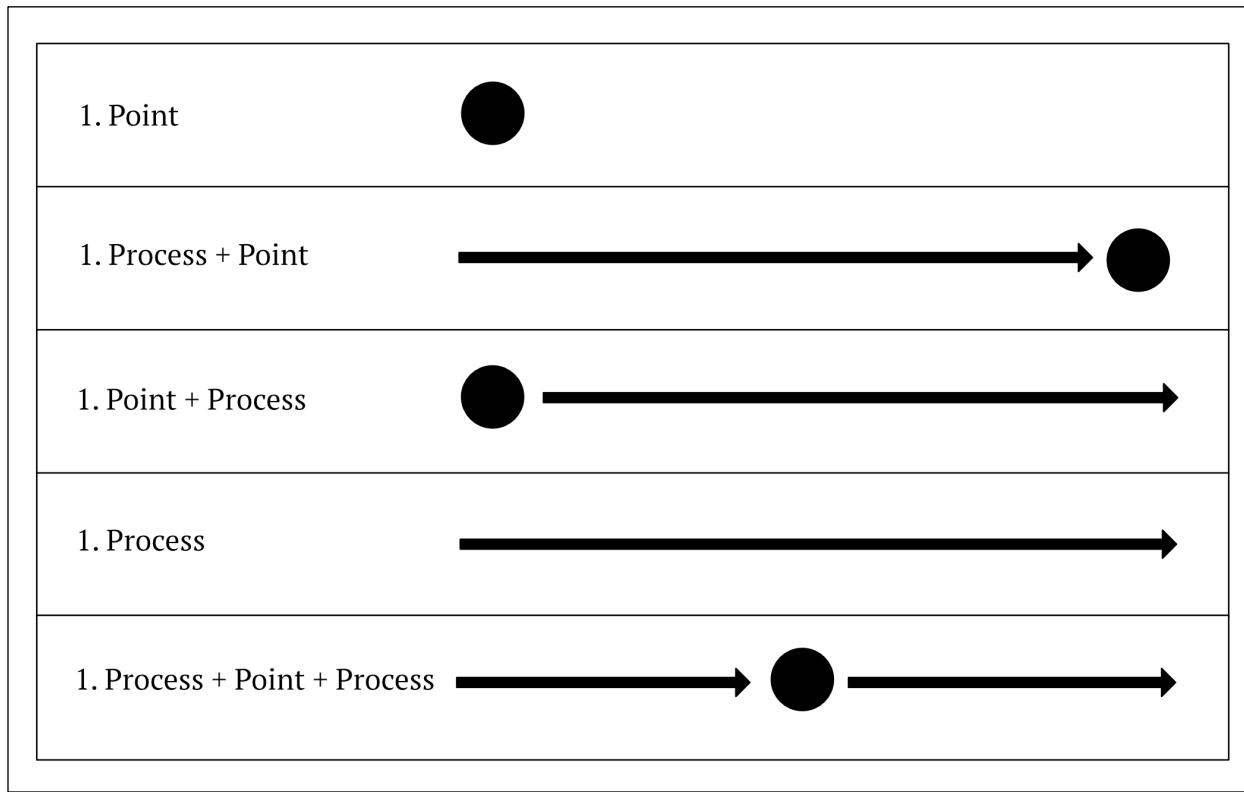
Figure 2 shows that there are at least five choices available to us. The first choice is what the typical understanding of point-in-time conversion is all about. The emphasis is primarily on the point, with little concern for anything either leading up to or following that point. Choices two and three are variations on choice one, with choice two allowing for some process in the life of the potential convert prior to the particular point-in-time that they now find themselves in, but with no real need for post-conversion follow-up. Choice three still puts the emphasis solely on the point-in-time conversion but sees that there is a necessary continuing follow-up process. Choice four—only process—is what many Christians believe has been their experience. However, oftentimes even with process conversions there was still some crucial point in time that kept them going in the process. From a human perspective, I believe that we are better off in our evangelism efforts when we do bring non-Christians to a definite point of relationship with Jesus rather than to leave it only at the level of process. In fact, for me, choice five is probably what most often happens when an individual decides to follow Jesus: a prior process leads to a conscious point-in-time decision followed by a continuing process that both confirms and reinforces that decision. I especially like choice five because it allows for the prior working of the Holy Spirit in the

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life of the Jesus follower before he or she ever makes a conscious decision to follow Jesus. Furthermore, this fifth choice also allows for God working within the religious and cultural understandings of the potential Jesus follower, thus causing us to re-evaluate our own post-conversion prejudices regarding those same religious and cultural understandings.

What does this analysis of conversion have to do with the amount of necessary Jesus knowledge? There is *always* a process involved and that even a minimum process means that some amount of Jesus knowledge may have been given. In the previous section on the book of Acts, in almost every case there is some knowledge given. But just how much knowledge is sufficient? Even the evangelistic tool most associated with the conversion-as-point method—the Four Spiritual Laws—has significant knowledge requirements, as seen below.

> **Law 1:** God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.
>
> **Law 2:** Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.
>
> **Law 3:** Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.
>
> **Law 4:** We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.
>
> **Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be (see https://crustore.org/four-laws-english).

Here are some basic presuppositions regarding knowledge requirements found in the Four Spiritual Laws:

- **Law 1** presupposes the individual understands (believes?) that there is indeed a God, but it begs questions like: What kind of God is He? Why does He love? Why does He have a plan for me?

- **Law 2** presupposes an understanding of sinfulness.

- **Law 3** presupposes an understanding of Jesus and his sonship, death, and rising again, as well as his propitiation for sin.

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- **Law 4** presupposes an understanding of receiving Jesus, Jesus is Savior and Lord, and God's love and plan for us.

- **The Four Laws'** prayer presupposes an understanding of the concept of the door of my life, receiving Jesus, Savior, Lord, forgiving sins, eternal life, taking control, throne of my life, and so on.

What conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of conversion as point or process? While a process approach naturally lends itself to time for more Jesus knowledge even in the typical point method of evangelism—like the Four Spiritual Laws—there is much essential Jesus knowledge required. But, once again, both approaches must deal with these questions: How much of such knowledge is really understood by the one receiving the message of salvation? And how much understanding is necessary?

There are advantages to the fifth choice—process + point + process—viewing conversion as a point in a process that both precedes and follows that point. What this means is that conversion is really a part of a lengthier movement towards Jesus, wherein the act of conversion is simply a point in time in a continuing movement in an individual's life towards a greater awareness of, understanding of, and ultimately commitment to Jesus. This movement towards Jesus alternative is reflected in Figure 3, with more and more Jesus knowledge added in the discipleship process as the individual moves further in their movement towards Jesus.

Figure 3: Conversion as Movement Towards Jesus

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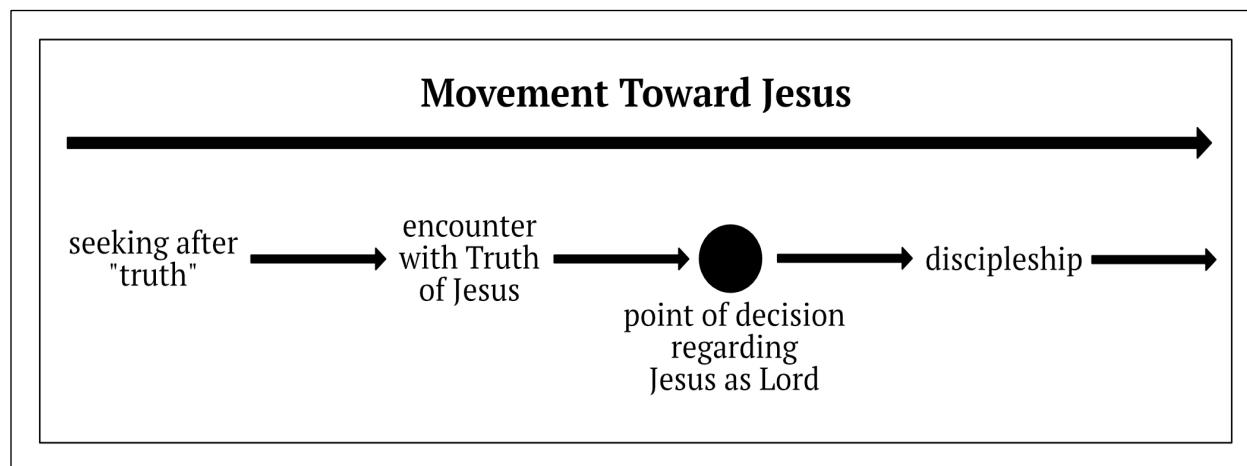
Conversion viewed as coming to a point of decision in some type of a process (short or long) means that the bringer of the gospel takes the time to build a relationship with the potential convert as a fellow human being. This will mean addressing hurts and needs, points of commonality, religious views, cultural practices; in short, trying to figure out what indeed is good news for him or her. It is during this relationship-building process that adequate Jesus knowledge can be shared with the potential Jesus follower. Relationships like this take time but can have great rewards. For, if by God's grace, the potential convert knowingly decides to follow Jesus then often there is subsequently an open door to continuing the relationship and a very natural discipleship process occurs, a process which continues to give the follower more Jesus knowledge.

## Towards a Recommended Salvation Allowance

So, what then is the Recommended Salvation Allowance? I would like to argue here that there are many ways to become a follower of Jesus but that the foundational way is simply to believe that Jesus is Lord. Why Jesus is *Lord*? I believe this minimum acknowledgement is key since it reflects in the life of the would-be follower of Jesus the understanding that Jesus is Someone beyond him/herself who needs to be followed. This minimum acknowledgement is a conscious point-in-time decision to have a definite and ongoing relationship with Jesus. This involves, in Peace's nomenclature, the insight needed to see the Truth of Jesus—as incomplete as the understanding of that Truth may be at the time—and with that insight begin the process of "turning from and turning to" that will eventually result in a transformed life (Peace 1999, 37). Of course, it is not enough simply to say that one believes that Jesus is Lord, for as Jesus makes clear: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven …" (Matthew 7:2). Rather, believing unto salvation must be rooted in enough knowledge to view that Jesus is the object of belief precisely because of a further understanding of who He is in relationship to one's life.

This acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord is key to the commencement in the life of the Jesus follower of a continuing movement towards Jesus that will, or should, naturally carry on in the discipleship process. Of course, there is much other knowledge of Jesus that will need to eventually be added to that initial cognitive decision to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. This other knowledge will contain more information about Jesus that will deepen the ongoing relationship that the new follower of Jesus will have with his/her Lord. The Recommended Salvation Allowance Inverted Pyramid, seen

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below in Figure 4, helps to show both the information about Jesus that should follow as well as an attempt at the timing of the giving of that information in the discipleship process.

Figure 4: Recommended Salvation Allowance Inverted Pyramid

| Jesus is the third Person of the Trinity | Jesus is the propitiation for my sins | Jesus is the fulfillment of the Levitical sacrifices | Jesus is the pre-existing One | Jesus is the Alpha and Omega |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jesus is the Creator of the world | Jesus is God | Jesus is coming back one day | Jesus is the only way for salvation | |
| Jesus died for my sins | Jesus' death is redemptive for me | Jesus was sent by God | | |
| Jesus is the Master of my life | Jesus is the one to whom I owe my allegiance | | | |
| **Jesus is Lord** | | | | |

I believe that the Inverted Pyramid outlined above begins to give us a grasp of both the minimum Recommended Salvation Allowance that is foundational for anyone who would be saved as well as the layers of further information about Lord Jesus that is necessary for any biblical discipleship process. Notice that as one moves farther up the Inverted Pyramid more information is given about Jesus. While all the information is true, all of it may not be important information about Jesus that a non-follower of Jesus must fully comprehend prior to following Jesus. More information helps both to flesh out for the new believer what his/her conscious decision to acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus is all about (privately or publically), as well as to flesh out for the new believer just who the Lord Jesus really is. What is most crucial is that even though individuals who decide to follow Jesus may not know a lot about Him it is important that they have been given enough information so that what they do know about Him is accurate (cf. Peace 1999, 299).

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Different Christian evangelists will place different kinds of information in the various Inverted Pyramid boxes depending upon their own salvation experience, worldview, denominational affiliation, and so on. But biblically it appears that the foundational acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord is where salvation begins. This is the minimal point in both the encounter evangelism and process evangelism approaches; it is when a new relationship with Jesus begins. It is at this point that the Holy Spirit begins to give the new follower of Jesus new insight into either old incorrect understandings of Jesus that need to be corrected or additional correct understandings. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit has not been working previously in the individual's life, but that after this initial salvation acknowledgement subsequent understandings are given more clarity. It is also not to say that the new follower of Jesus fully understands what their acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord means. But it is the necessary first step in the lifelong process of discipleship.

Carrying on with the Recommended Dietary Allowance and vitamin analogy that began this article, we can say that "Vitamin L"—Jesus is Lord—is the most essential Jesus knowledge vitamin in the Recommended Salvation Allowance. Other information about Jesus is also important. In just the same way that the human body needs a variety of vitamins and nutrients to survive so, too, does the new believer: "Vitamin S" (Jesus is Savior), "Vitamin M" (Jesus is Master), and so on. As with vitamins and nutrients, too little for humans is not enough and too much—like Vitamin E—can actually be detrimental. Carrying this analogy further: while an understanding of Jesus as the third person of the Trinity is theologically very important, this understanding is probably not necessary until farther along in the Recommended Salvation Allowance Inverted Pyramid discipleship process, especially for Muslim followers of Jesus.

I believe that the words of the apostle Paul, found in 2 Corinthians 4:5, are appropriate here: "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Yes, indeed, when we are sharing the gospel with someone we preach not ourselves but that Jesus is Lord! We do not preach our own ideas of what people need in order to be saved but merely the basic facts about Jesus, and the most important salvation fact is that He is Lord. Everything in the Recommended Salvation Allowance Inverted Pyramid must build off the fact that Jesus is special, more superior or powerful than we are, the Lord of our lives.

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## Conclusions

The words of theologian Millard Erickson—though framing the overall question of this article a bit differently—are a good way to conclude this article:

> What we are talking about . . . is really how much information about the fuller revelation and the gospel may one be ignorant of and still be saved . . . We must make certain that our practice of evangelism is consistent with the answer we give. If one insists that to be saved in this era it is necessary to know and believe in Jesus, how much must one know, understand, and believe? Must one understand the incarnation, the fact that Jesus was both God and man? How orthodox must this understanding be? Is it necessary to believe that Jesus was deity just as was the Father, in the same sense and to the same degree? What if one believes that Jesus was the Son of God, but not actually God, or has not thought through what he or she believes by that expression? Must one hold the substitutionary-penal theory of the atonement, for that atoning death to be efficacious? What of the factual-historical-geographical questions? Could one be saved who mistakenly thought that Jesus lived in South America, or in the third century, or did not know when or where his life and ministry took place? Perhaps there is room for acknowledging that God alone may know in every case exactly whose faith is sufficient for salvation (Erickson 1996, 195).

Erickson's last statement is particularly relevant for this study. Yes, indeed, it is God alone who knows in every case exactly whose faith is sufficient for salvation. The good news here is that the salvation of individuals is not something that we do, it is something that God does. Of course, we, in our human strivings, do try to make sure that those individuals we witness to have enough correct knowledge about Jesus—the Recommended Salvation Allowance—to make a credible decision either for or against Jesus. But praise God that in the final analysis it is His business as to whether each individual's faith is sufficient for salvation. We simply need to do our job in the best way possible with the assurance that God, through the Holy Spirit, is about His job as well.

Let us return to Mansour and his decision to follow Jesus. The missionary who was meeting with Mansour that day had previously had many conversations about Jesus with him. Mansour's decision after his dream to follow Jesus, therefore, was based upon

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some previous knowledge of Jesus, though this knowledge was not clear to Mansour at the time it was given. However, it was enough knowledge—confirmed by the dream—for Mansour to begin to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. Consequently, the missionary's response was simply to praise God for Mansour's decision, pray for Mansour, and to give Mansour more information about Jesus in light of the decision he had made. His weekly conversations with Mansour continued, building on more theological issues—concerning both orthodoxy as well as orthopraxy—as Mansour continued in his movement towards Jesus, now as His disciple. Mansour continues to follow Jesus to this day.

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Pentecostal churches are the quickest growing segment of Christianity in the world today (Miller 2013, 9-10). A prevalent phenomenon among these churches is the preaching of the prosperity gospel, claiming that health and wealth are readily available for believers today (Yong 2012, 15-16). Three church plants in Germany translated the prosperity gospel differently while adhering to an evangelical view of the gospel, conversion, and transformation in discipleship. Hope Center in Berlin (HCB), an independent Pentecostal church led by a second-generation Ghanian migrant, openly embraced prosperity teaching. ConnectKirche Erfurt (CKE), which belongs to Germany's largest Pentecostal denomination, viewed the automatic claim to health and wealth critically. Nonetheless, the church affirmed the gospel effect of upward social mobility and the possibility of healing. The pastor of the non-charismatic Reformed church Gospel Church Munich (GCM), which belongs to the Redeemer City to City church planting network, vehemently rejected prosperity teaching. He directed his affluent constituency to find spiritual riches in healthy relationships. The missionary activities of these churches are salient expressions of correlating evangelical movements exerting a growing influence on German evangelicalism: Migrant missions, new Pentecostal churches, and American mission efforts along with globally active church planting organizations. Their faith expressions represent part of the new mosaic of lived Christianity in post-Christian Europe and pose the challenge of theological discernment to leaders across denominations (Liesen 2021, 40-78, 284-85).

The question arises whether the diverse contextualization of prosperity teaching remained within Christian orthodoxy or mixed cultural or religious sources foreign to the biblical message, leading to forms of syncretism. First, an introduction to the prosperity gospel offers insights into the central claims and prominent figures in prosperity teaching. The subsequent section describes the contextualization of health and wealth by the three church plants and its effect on the transformation of converts. The basis for these reports is a multi-case study about transformative conversion entailing interviews with converts and pastors in each church (Liesen 2021, 79-275).

Finally, a theological evaluation of prosperity teaching offers the framework for assessing the translation of the prosperity gospel.

## The Prosperity Gospel

Kathleen Hladky (1994, 83) defines the prosperity gospel by the two teachings of God's assurance of well-being and the believer's claim to prosperity by faith: "First, God grants all his faithful followers physical health and financial prosperity; second, believers claim their divine right to wealth and health through positive confession, financial offerings, and the persistent faith that God must fulfill his promises." The believer's assertion of prosperity by faith finds its historical roots in the New Thought movement. Most of the New Thought proponents, such as Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993), identified themselves as Christians and believed that the "proper use of the mind could control reality, including all the experiences and circumstances of an individual life" (Hladky 1994, 85, 84-88). Peale (2019, 10-23, 174-75) believed that positive affirmations through Bible memorization and prayer need to replace low self-esteem, the problem of modern man. Inevitably, a positive mental state will lead to physical well-being and success (Zimmerling 2009, 178-179).

Kenneth Hagin (1917-2003) popularized the modern-day prosperity gospel as the founder of the so-called Word-of-Faith or Faith Movement (Bowman 2001, 92-94; Bowler 2013, 44-46). Hagin refers to Gal 3:13-14 and teaches that the blessing of Abraham in Christ's redemptive death encompasses physical health and material wealth (Hagin, n.d.d.; Zimmerling 2009, 174-75). Satan causes all sickness, and there is no inherent value in suffering for testing the Christian faith or maturing the believer. Instead, 1 Pet 2:24 (HCSB) assures health to all believers who claim their right to healing since they "have been healed by His wounds." Lack of healing corresponds to a lack of faith (Hagin, n.d.a.; Otto 2017, 371-76). David Yonggi Cho added the idea of visualization to the concept of positive thinking. Believers need to enter a fourth spiritual dimension, where miracles and control over circumstances become attainable. According to Cho (1979, 38-41, 44, 65-66), a concrete vision or dream is the prerequisite for answered prayer. Well-known proponents of the Faith Movement include Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, and Paula White (Hladky 2012, 82; Peters and Dias 2019).

In the United States, the message of prosperity intertwined closely with American civil religion and instilled the confidence of upward mobility through hard work and divine favor. The prosperity gospel crossed over to mainline Protestant churches and

became an inspirational force for the American Dream (Bowler 2013, 6-7, 32, 226-29; New World Encyclopedia, n.d.). Reinhard Bonke (1940-2019) played a critical role in introducing health and wealth teaching in Africa during the Fire Convention in 1986. A concept of salvation that integrates supernatural intervention and applies it to physical well-being resonated with indigenous worldviews (Kalu 2008, 259-63). In present-day Germany, mostly churches with an immigrant background embrace the hope of the prosperity gospel. However, ministries such as Bill Johnson's Bethel Church, which is part of the Faith Movement, spread the idea that heaven's physical blessings are readily available on earth across evangelical denominational lines (Otto 2017, 370-71; Ehmann 2018, 76; Johnson 2003, 32-33).

## Translating Prosperity

Each of the three church plants translated the claims of the prosperity gospel differently. This section begins with a description of how the background and theological orientation of leaders shaped translation. Then, a report about each church's contextualization of prosperity teaching within their social context precedes the converts' testimonies concerning their transformational changes.

### Influences on Translation

The background and theological orientation of Christian leaders and the social context of their audiences influenced the translation of the prosperity gospel in each church plant. Pastor Lupemba grew up in a socially disadvantaged context and shared the same economic hardships with many young people at Hope Center in Berlin (interview with Joshua Lupemba, November 19, 2019). His childhood experience of participating in a Pentecostal immigrant church as a second-generation Ghanaian, his ordination in his father's Pentecostal church in Belgium, and his interaction with Bethel Church in Redding, CA, made Lupemba well acquainted with prosperity teaching (@cclnbe, Twitter; @PstJoshuaLupemba, Facebook, February 27, 2019). The deficient self-perception of people who were raised in poverty and the social limitations of his audience in Berlin supplied Lupemba with the urgent cause to preach a message of hope promised in the prosperity gospel.

Pastor Herla grew up as an atheist in Thuringia, the same federal state where he planted ConnectKirche Erfurt. Herla was converted only eight years before starting the church plant. Consequently, he related easily to the questions of the secular population

in Erfurt. His internship at Mountain View Church, a charismatic Mennonite church in Fresno, CA, and his studies at the seminary of the Bund Freikirchlicher Pfingstgemeinden (Federation of Pentecostal Churches) shaped his theological perspective to oppose the claims of the prosperity gospel (interview with Kevin Herla, April 20, 2020). Nevertheless, the growing disparity between a poor and rich population in Erfurt made him deeply aware of the needs of socially disadvantaged people and provided the impetus to inspire upward social movement.

Prior to planting Gospel Church Munich, Steffen Müller pastored a church within the Presbyterian Church of America, a denomination with many affluent congregations. His pastoral experience in the United States helped him to relate well to their wealthy audience in Grünwald, the richest town of Germany and location of their church plant at the time of this study (Braun 2019). Müller's education at a Reformed seminary and his conservative, Reformed theological convictions influenced his criticism of the prosperity gospel. In contrast to a message of health and wealth, Müller identified relational poverty as the greatest deficiency in a community of the super-rich (interview with Steffen Müller, February 21, 2020).

### Hope Center in Berlin

Observations revealed that Lupemba translated his messages to socially disadvantaged young people in Berlin. The pastor affirmed that he "unashamedly professed a gospel of wealth," even if preachers often misrepresented the biblical concept. He believed that God would make him a multi-billionaire to accomplish the mission God entrusted to him. In the interview, the pastor explained that people who grow up in poverty adopt a mindset of poverty, making them believe that change is not possible: "Poverty is simply said: 'I do not deserve it. That is why I live in a limited way.'" The pastor believed that his congregation needs to replace their sense of deprivation with a sense of inner wealth. Lupemba wanted to "help these people first of all to generate wealth in their hearts, that is, to know that God wants me to be well and that I am loved by God. I am worth it." This inner wealth would naturally result in physical well-being since God does not destine believers to poverty and suffering. In a Sunday message on November 17, 2019, the pastor interpreted Abraham's blessing in Gal 3:13-14 as a physical blessing readily available for believers today. Christians could overcome all forms of deprivation by activating blessings through faith. Furthermore, each believer should learn how to enter a fourth dimension of the Spirit, where they could bend time and produce miracles at their will.

Each worship service during this research study included a thirty-minute message on prosperity apart from the main sermon. A congregational reading of financial blessings took place before each offering. Worshippers affirmed the expectation of material rewards by reciting claims of wealth. Concurrent with the emphasis on financial blessing was the expectation of generous giving, yet Lupemba did not coerce people into giving. "If it irritates you," the pastor explained during the service on October 29, 2019, "do not give!"

Lupemba also encouraged the idea that believers may claim continual physical health. Congregants should trust in God's healing and protection rather than place their faith in natural remedies. The church offered prayers for supernatural healing every Sunday. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the pastor shared on Facebook that faith in Christ's blood protects believers: "No virus or disease will come near your home. Trust in the Lord for protection" (@PstJoshuaLupemba, Facebook, March 17, 2020). Lupemba rejected the idea that God's will is to teach spiritual truth through suffering. In the sermon on January 26, 2020, he explained that God intends prosperity for believers and to give "double for our trouble." Simultaneously, interviews and observations revealed that the admonishment to abstain from unhealthy habits, manage finances well, and pursue professional goals was integral to achieving physical well-being at Hope Center.

Finally, the church intended wealth accumulation to flow into social action. In the service on November 27, 2020, the pastor exclaimed that God generates wealth for Christians to address the world's needs. Hope Center pursued the ambitious goal of social transformation in the city district of Neukölln.

**ConnectKirche Erfurt**

Kevin Herla was not a proponent of the prosperity gospel but believed that the gospel has a positive, social effect on converts. He critically reflected on a message of health and wealth promoted by such ministries as Bill Johnson's Bethel Church in Redding, CA. The greatest treasure in heaven, according to the pastor, is not material wealth but individuals whom Christians help to convert: "I always say the greatest treasure I have in heaven are people whom I will see there again, who have met Jesus. That is worth more than all the money in the world. So, for me, these are the greatest treasures of eternity in heaven." At the same time, it is reasonable to presume that a positive social change occurs when individuals convert and acquire new self-confidence. At his Pentecostal seminary, Herla learned about the term *social lift* to describe the process of

social improvement through conversion: "One notices that the level of education increases with someone who becomes a Christian, but simply because he becomes self-confident, because he can love himself again, and because he feels loved by God."

Similar to Hope Center, CKE strongly encouraged its members to give financially by offering various giving opportunities, such as online giving in each service. Church leaders did not suggest, though, that financial giving results directly in financial blessing.

Moreover, Herla did not support the claim of the prosperity gospel that physical health is only dependent on the assertion of individual faith. In the interview, he elucidated that believers cannot claim a promise of supernatural healing, and the lack of healing does not relate directly to the measure of faith by believers. God may intervene supernaturally at any time, but He also heals through medical treatments. After Herla had become sick with a severe eye disease, his wife prayed during the service on April 25, 2020: "God, we know you are our healer, but you also have wisdom. We pray that you grant healing but also for wisdom for the doctors so they can find a diagnosis and so we can experience how you heal!" In another service during the COVID-19 pandemic, Herla's wife petitioned God to heal the sick, help those who lost their jobs, and give hope to the hopeless. She also thanked God for the service of all medical staff and prayed for conversions. Despite CKE's critical attitude toward claiming health, their annual report states that five miraculous healings occurred in 2018 (ConnectKirche Erfurt 2018).

Finally, CKE integrated the social improvement of converts with their approach to discipleship, allowing individuals to have the final say in determining their personal development. The website declares that after conversion, each person "can decide on their own what this decision means for their life," although church leaders assisted converts in the discipleship process (ConnectKirche Erfurt, n.d.).

### Gospel Church Munich

Müller's approach to translating the Christian message into the social context of his audience related directly to his evaluation of the prosperity gospel. According to the pastor, the primary idol of the affluent community of Grünwald is the personal

identification with success or possessions. Successful people who become disillusioned with achievements need to hear that only the gospel can satisfy their deepest needs: "When the men open up, they eventually say that all their success ultimately does not satisfy them . . . We all have a hole in our heart that we desperately try to fill or to stuff with all sorts of things . . . In the end, only Jesus Christ and the gospel can really fill that." Thus, sermons should not exclude topics that contradict the assumptions of his wealthy audience. The doctrine of God's sovereignty, for example, postulates that even the rich depend on God entirely. Müller applied his Reformed theology to confront self-sufficiency and tell wealthy individuals that "the most decisive matter in your life you cannot do. God, in His grace, has to give it to you as a gift. You are completely, 100 percent, dependent."

Consequently, the pastor sharply opposed prosperity teaching as a false gospel since it teaches people to believe they are still in control and "selfish desires stay in the foreground, where Jesus must be a *Wunscherfüller* [fulfiller of wishes], like pressing a button on a machine." In the interview, Müller reflected critically on ministers who preach messages of prosperity for the sake of church growth, such as Joel Osteen, pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, TX. In contrast, Jesus' ministry shrunk when he talked about his path toward suffering and death. Thus, the pastor motivated converts to reject false affirmations through material possessions and seek true wealth in restoring broken relationships, a significant issue in wealthy communities.

Observations revealed that financial giving was a minor aspect of the services at GCM, though church members gave large donations toward social causes globally. Social action in the vicinity of the church plant, according to the pastor, remained minimal due to the affluence of Grünwald.

Finally, Müller believed that the apostle Paul's hardships and Jesus' suffering and death prove that a claim to health contradicts Scripture. Authentic faith entails learning to live with sickness while God may intervene supernaturally at any time: "I know that many churches teach that Jesus heals you from all diseases. Yet, in the end, that is not biblical, even though God often heals. There are also situations where Christians have to live with suffering and sickness, and that is an authentic faith: 'What does it mean to follow Christ faithfully if I do not get healed?'" The pastor clarified that the possibility of supernatural healing does not mean that God shields every Christian from sickness and death. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Müller taught his congregation that Jesus allows the virus to exist but may intervene to stop the pandemic suddenly or assist

scientists in developing medication quickly. This knowledge should cause Christians to trust in God's power, engage in evangelism, and expect God to bring about conversions.

## Transformation of Converts

The divergent approaches to the translation of the prosperity gospel affected the discipleship process of converts. On the one hand, converts across church plants shared profound transformational changes. Notably, converts reported the experience of supernatural or emotional phenomena that solidified their discipleship. On the other hand, the prosperity teaching and its influence on transformation varied among converts.

At HCB, converts claimed their health, reported personal healings, or improved their financial outlook. Nadja recounted how she struggled with debt before her conversion. After she became a Christian and due to Lupemba's initiative, Nadja developed an altruistic passion for helping others manage their finances. She went on to study Public and Non-Profit Management at a Berlin university. Nadja also reported that she experienced supernatural healing, which solidified her commitment to discipleship. After her healing, she committed to following Jesus "*jetzt erst recht* [now, more than ever]" (interview with Nadja, January 24, 2020). Andrea, who grew up in social hardship, applied the message of wealth during a one-year discipleship program at HCB. She stated that for the first time in her life, she built healthy financial habits: "Then I was able to learn financial management," which "made me realize why I had not accomplished certain things in my life because I never knew how it works. No one ever taught it." Andrea also claimed a message of health and believed she was close to receiving permanent physical health by faith. After reading a book by Kenneth Hagin, she explained that "the healing in the Bible that God gives us is for us. So we have the right to be healthy . . . I received the revelation about healing. I cannot see it fully yet . . . but I have received the revelation about it, and I know it is mine" (interview with Andrea, November 20, 2019).

The testimonies of converts at CKE affirmed that their conversion not only led to transformational changes but engendered new socio-economic opportunities. In the interview, Herla recalled the example of a young man who had failed many job interviews. Soon after his conversion, he secured new employment due to the positive effects of an inward transformation. A new sense of identity provided confidence during the job interview: "He believes in himself again and trusts that God holds his whole life in his hand. He went into the interview with that attitude . . . He probably went in with

a wholly different demeanor because he understood more about who he is as God's son." Lara's attendance of a Christian leadership conference with the church staff inspired her to imagine a more purposeful career path. She decided to leave her current job and start her own consulting business while church leaders assisted her during this transitional phase (interview with Lara, April 25, 2020).

At GCM, converts found a new purpose apart from material wealth. Silke, a well-situated optometrist, gave up all reliance on material wealth and found true meaning in her spiritual life. In the interview, she explained that "I have no more respect for money or big cars or anything like that because I see the things that really mean something, and those are located somewhere else, on the inside" (interview with Silke, March 6, 2020). Andreas developed a passion for assisting social causes through his business venture and supporting the spread of Christianity worldwide. After his conversion, he started a new enterprise to help people generate income through sales in social networks. Additionally, the profits from a new clothing line would fund organizations that assist persecuted Christians: "This idea with [the clothing line] Plan of God is actually about releasing funds and making them available to help organizations that, in the name of the Lord, deal with the persecution of Christians around the world" (interview with Andreas, March 11, 2020).

**Summary**

Each church translated the claims of the prosperity gospel differently within their social context. The background and theological orientation of each leader shaped their view of prosperity. Hope Center embraced the gospel of health and wealth for a socially disadvantaged audience in Berlin. Converts responded to prosperity teaching by improving their financial habits, pursuing new professional goals, and claiming their health by faith.

Although many people came out of social hardship, CKE did not offer the claims of prosperity to their diverse audience in Erfurt. Nevertheless, pastor Herla believed that conversion results in a new sense of self-confidence and an improvement of social status. The church reported physical healings while denying an automatic claim to health. Converts developed confidence to pursue new professional careers and benefited from socio-economic improvements.

Gospel Church Munich rejected prosperity teaching as a false gospel that gives people the illusion of human control rather than to evoke dependence on God. Instead, pastor Müller preached a counter-cultural message to the affluent community of

Grünwald, challenging them to give up the idols of possessions and success. As a result, converts at GCM placed less value on material possessions, although economic opportunities could advance the global missions.

## Theological Evaluation

This section offers a theological evaluation of the claims of prosperity teaching. The analysis of financial and physical blessings begins with affirming certain aspects of prosperity teaching and moves to address critical components. An explication of how prosperity teaching relates to foundational components of Christian salvation concludes this theological appraisal made from an evangelical viewpoint.

### The Promise of Financial Blessing

First, the Bible does contain affirmations of material blessing for believers. Zimmerling (2009, 176) warns against spiritualizing biblical promises too quickly and jeopardizing their material focus since "without relating blessings to the earthly life, faith loses its connection to reality." Similarly, Pentecostal theologian Frank Macchia (2012, 226) interprets prosperity teaching as a way for Pentecostals to bring supernatural power "to bear on the concrete realities of the material and institutional life." Scriptural promises, such as Phil 4:18-19 and Mark 10:29-31, confirm a this-worldly outlook and relate material blessing to financial giving and the sacrifice of ministry. Second, the preaching of prosperity creates hope for socially disadvantaged people. Bowler's moving account of a lecture about the prosperity gospel to prison inmates reveals how people who endure suffering yearn for the assurance of a better life. Bowler (2015, 67) surmises that "people of faith are people of renewed expectations." Third, the hope of prosperity can result in behavioral changes that favor economic improvement, perhaps motivating "a certain cause of action that anticipates the gradual, if not more efficient, overcoming of poverty" (Yong 2012, 19). Jens Schlamelcher (2018, 300) explains that prosperity teaching calls for new work ethics and lifestyle changes that help the poor succeed in upward social movement by providing "the tools to achieve it." The Bible testifies a cause-and-effect relationship between hard work, non-excessive behavior, and material reward (Prv 14:23, 23:19-21, 1 Thes 4:10-12). Thus, the warning to condemn a message of prosperity too quickly is appropriate. Critics, especially speaking from an Anglo-American or Eurocentric perspective, might not know a life of poverty where such prosperity teachers as David Yonggi Cho developed their theology (Yong 2012, 20;

Zimmerling 2009, 181-82). Besides, evangelical opponents of prosperity ideology need to be self-critical in their assessments since many non-Pentecostal, Protestant churches also adopted the message of wealth (Bowler 2013, 236-37).

At the same time, a focus on material wealth in Christian discipleship is out of alignment with the biblical testimony about finances and foundational aspects of the spiritual life. First, Scripture encourages believers to pursue contentment regardless of wealth or poverty. The apostle Paul shares in Phil 4:11 that he "learned to be content in whatever circumstances" he was and offers himself as an example to believers on how to achieve contentment by God's power (Phil 4:13). Modesty in material possessions prevents an obsession with achieving material wealth, which is a fundamental distraction from the spiritual life (Prov 30:7-9, Lk 12:15). Hence, it is not surprising that scandals of moral failure and greed follow many prosperity teachers (1 Tm 6:9; Bowler 2013, 107-10). Second, proponents of prosperity often misuse biblical references to prove their claims of wealth (Brogdon 2015, 40-41). One popular example is the interpretation that the promise in Gal 3:14 entails the material blessing of Abraham for all believers. Jones and Woodbridge (2017, 54-55) point to the second part of the verse, which clarifies that the promise refers to the blessing of salvation in Christ. Third, a faulty understanding of giving that obligates God to reward those who donate to the church financially leads to the manipulation of donors (McConnell 1994, chap. 10). New Testament authors never portray giving as a technique to achieve material gain but motivate giving for the selfless purpose of supporting Christian ministry or meeting the needs of poverty (2. Cor 8:13-15, Phil 4:14-19).

## The Promise of Physical Health

The New Testament implies that God may intervene through supernatural healing at any time. Pentecostal scholar David Mende (2019, 27-28) affirms this possibility while rejecting the notion that sin causes all sicknesses (Jn 9:3) or that healing is available automatically. Douglas Moo (1988, 195-96, 205-09) takes the same position against the viewpoint of the Reformers like Calvin, who denied that miraculous healing is possible after the apostolic age. Instead, passages like Jas 5:14-16 encourage elders to pray for healing expectantly. Furthermore, Otto (2017, 397) deduces that seeking spiritual intervention for physical needs enables believers to experience God in the context of their own lives, creating an "indissoluble connection between experience and faith." Candy Brown (2014, 40-42) goes further by stating that praying for healing empowers both recipients and facilitators of healing in contexts of social hardship by instilling the assurance of God's loving intervention.

Nonetheless, several reasons speak against the theology and widespread practice of healing by prosperity preachers. First of all, God does not always and continually heal those with sufficient faith. The New Testament is silent toward claiming that the presence of God's kingdom on earth must manifest itself through supernatural healing. Instead, the church is in a state of already-not-yet of the kingdom of God and awaits a final deliverance from suffering in the coming age (Rev 21:4). The example of Paul's thorn in the flesh shows that sickness and suffering do not necessarily originate from a lack of faith (2 Cor 12:7-10). Ultimately, healing rests on God's sovereignty rather than a human choice to pray for and believe in healing (Moo 1988, 197-98, 200-02).

Secondly, prosperity teaching, with its health claim, tends to misrepresent the meaning of physical suffering. The Bible depicts suffering as a common feature in the life of God's people, denoting general hardships and not limiting suffering to persecution (Moo 1988, 199-200). God transforms suffering, which is, in and of itself, not a blessing but a consequence of evil in the world, to become a blessing in the spiritual formation of believers. Christ's attitude toward suffering became the example for Christian discipleship in that "he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). Paul encourages Christians to rejoice in afflictions since they will produce endurance, character formation, and hope (Rom 5:3-5). Thus, Jones and Woodbridge (2017, 86, 69-92) conclude correctly that the "greatest benefit of suffering is the growth in faith it fosters by forcing people to rely on God."

Thirdly, the inability of prosperity teaching to integrate the unavoidable reality of suffering generates negative psychological consequences for the believing community. A fixation on demanding supernatural healing blames those who do not recover from illnesses for lack of faith or the presence of sin. Consequently, congregations that adhere to a prosperity mindset are ill-prepared to comfort those who deal with sickness and death (Zimmerling 2009, 179-80; Brown 2014, 52; Bowler 2013, 174-77).

### Prosperity and Salvation by Faith

Prosperity teachers often view faith as a mechanical formula or a spiritual force that compels God to respond to the believers' requests for health or wealth. This type of faith resembles the New Thought movement's understanding of mind control (McConnell 1994, chap. 8; Jones and Woodbridge 2017, 45-48). Conversely, biblical faith implies a reliance on God and guides the believing community to release control from the

individual to God and his sovereign will (Erickson 1989, 406, 939-40; Moo 1988, 204-09). Jesus prayed in Lk 22:42, "not My will, but Yours, be done," and Jesus instructs Christians to pray that God's will be done rather than ours in the Lord's prayer (Mt 6:10).

Therefore, promoting self-centered faith quickly misguides Christians to set aside the centrality of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross and salvation by faith. Jones and Woodbridge warn that prosperity teaching may alter the central message of the redemptive work of Christ and turn the gospel "into a human-focused religion" of self-fulfillment. In contrast, salvation by faith in Christ does not entail the promise of a comfortable life marked by continual well-being but requires the total abandonment of selfish interests in the way of the cross (Matt 16:24-25, Gal 6:14). Christ's redemption offers immediate forgiveness but not instant prosperity. Otto (2017, 398) concludes justifiably that Hagin's main error is the claim to prosperity simultaneous with salvation by faith at the point of conversion (McConnell 1994, chap. 10; Moo 1988, 202-04).

## Assessment of Church Plants

The church plants in this case study exhibited commonalities and differences in the contextualization of prosperity teaching within their respective cultural contexts. All three churches implemented what Stephen Bevans (2002, chap. 4) calls the translation model, which gives priority to the authority of Scripture over contextual claims, making the gospel "the judge of all contexts, even though it seeks to work with and within all contexts." Bevans points out that this model fits in contexts of primary evangelization and secular cultures where people do not understand the premises of the gospel without attentive translation. Congruently, all three church plants faced a highly secular environment in the German cities of Berlin, Erfurt, and Grünwald. Also, each of the pastors affirmed a supra-cultural gospel, believed in the Bible's authority, and taught biblical texts as propositional truth. Thus, all three church plants shared in common that the translation of conversion resulted in the transformation of converts with a firm commitment to biblical standards. Each church was willing to go against pre-dominant cultural norms. One example was promoting marriage versus tolerating pre-marital sexual relationships, the latter posing a potential concession to cultural conventions in Germany (Bevans 2002, chap. 4).

Church plants were similar in translating evangelical conversion with a commitment to discipleship according to biblical values, while they differed significantly in their

translation of the prosperity gospel. Hope Center in Berlin embraced the gospel of health and wealth and related it to socially disadvantaged young people. Pastor Lupemba applied what Amos Yong (2012, 21-22) calls the missional argument when he explained in the interview that God would make him a multi-billionaire so that he could accomplish the mission God entrusted to him. One essential aspect of this mission was to raise converts out of poverty by teaching prosperity and encouraging new work ethics and moral virtues. Thus, he provided a "source of empowerment" for converts to work toward individual prosperity and move beyond a dependence on social welfare (Chesnut 2012, 2019). However, financial well-being, according to Lupemba, proceeds from a renewed sense of inner wealth. Similar to the New Thought movement yet not without biblical support (Eph 3:16-19, Col 3:2), the pastor challenged his congregation to replace their inner sense of deprivation with a sense of inward prosperity (Zimmerling 2009, 177-79).

Regarding the assurance of health and wealth, Lupemba affirmed Hagin's interpretation that Abraham's blessing in Gal 3:14 consists of physical blessings for believers today (Hagin, n.d.d.; Zimmerling 2009, 174-75). A congregational reading, which was a translated text from Bethel church, helped worshippers affirm the expectation of monetary rewards by "speaking into reality what does not exist" (Kalu 2008, 255; Bethel Church, n.d.). The manipulation of financial donors, despite the emphasis on giving, did not occur. In agreement with Hagin's theology, the pastor also propagated that believers may claim continual health. He denied that God has a spiritual purpose for suffering (Hagin, n.d.c.; Hagin, n.d.b.; Otto 2017, 371-75).

Moreover, HCB encouraged converts to enter into what Cho (1983, 38-39, 44) describes as a fourth dimension of the Spirit, receive new revelations, and produce miracles. The practice of seeking personal revelations corresponds to Bevan's (2002, chap. 8) transcendental model of contextualization, which presumes that the consciousness of the individual is the starting point for knowledge and "is intimately involved in determining reality's basic shape." This attempt to enter visionary stages for extra-biblical revelations in prosperity teaching subverts the corrective guidance of Scripture and the Christian community since believers may claim subjective experiences as authoritative revelations (Bevans 2002, chap. 5; McConnell 1994, chap. 10).

Nonetheless, the case study revealed that adopting a prosperity mentality at HCB did not jeopardize the clear communication of genuine Christian conversion and the transformation of converts according to biblical standards. Also, the church did not

neglect to initiate socio-economic improvements locally for the sake of individual prosperity. HCB pursued ambitious goals of cultural transformation in Neukölln alongside its message of health and wealth (Macchia 2012, 230). Respectively, converts at Hope Center reported how they claimed their health by faith, experienced healing, and improved their social status by adopting new economic habits and professional goals.

ConnectKirche Erfurt faced a population similar to HCB in Berlin, with many congregants coming out of social hardship. Nevertheless, CKE did not hold to the claims of the prosperity gospel while retaining the belief in the possibility of God's supernatural intervention. Similar to Mende's (2019, 27-28) argument, pastor Herla shared that believers cannot claim a promise of supernatural healing, and a lack of healing does not relate directly to the measure of faith. God may intervene miraculously at any time but also heals through medical treatments. Thus, the pastor contested the cynical attitude toward medicine by some prosperity teachers.

Furthermore, the pastor stated that the benefit of upward economic mobility does not necessitate the promises of prosperity teaching. A social lift is the natural consequence of conversion and a new sense of inner self-worth (Yung 2016, 80-81). CKE integrated the social improvement of converts with their approach to discipleship, allowing individuals to determine the progression of their spiritual transformation. In this way, CKE implemented the anthropological model in contextualization, which focuses on preserving the cultural identity of Christian believers (Bevans 2002, chap. 5). Aside from encouraging economic mobility for individual converts, CKE regularly engaged the congregation in social action activities on behalf of Erfurt. The frequent emphasis on financial giving did not engender forms of manipulation to fund the local ministry by promising compounded returns (McConnell 1994, ch. 10). As a result, converts at CKE benefitted from social mobility. Lara, for example, dared to leave an unhealthy work environment and start her own business.

Gospel Church Munich rejected the prosperity gospel vehemently. Pastor Müller called the prosperity gospel a false gospel that leads to self-reliance rather than dependency on God. Hladky (2012, 93) agrees that many proponents of the Faith Movement communicate to believers that they "are the only ones who determine the outcomes of their lives." Müller believed that the apostle Paul's afflictions and the reality of Jesus' suffering and death prove that a health and wealth gospel contradicts Scripture. The Christian life entails learning how to live with suffering and sickness as part of authentic faith (Jones and Woodbridge 2017, 71-74, 85-87).

Rather than accumulating material wealth, GCM's constituency needed to seek true wealth in healing broken relationships. The pastor explained that the upper-class affluence of Grünwald magnifies the dysfunctionality in relationships. Müller also motivated converts to avoid false affirmations through material possessions and instead seek fulfillment in the spiritual life. This pastoral directive did not fall in line with the presumed influence of Calvinism to a this-worldly rather than a spiritual perspective, moving Christians to accumulate "wealth as a sign that assured them that they were among the elect" (Lewis 2014, 69). Instead, Müller applied what Bevans (2002, chap. 9) calls a counter-cultural approach to contextualization as he rejected the idol of wealth in an affluent community. Especially in Western societies that are pre-disposed against the gospel, the counter-cultural model is helpful to oppose an overemphasis on possessions and individualism (Bevans 2002, chap. 4). Concurrently, the pastor affirmed the possibility of God's supernatural intervention, including the possibility of healing. However, this expectation should not misguide Christians to claim healing but encourage them to prioritize evangelism and anticipate conversions.

Compared to HCB and CKE, GCM showed minimal initiative in promoting social transformation locally due to their wealthy community, but church members sponsored global relief work through generous financial giving. Silke reported how she lost her dependence on material wealth after her conversion. Andreas offered capitalist business approaches to benefit foreign missions, which is a frequent practice among prosperity teachers (Macchia 2012, 231).

It is easy to understand why pastor Müller condemned all prosperity teaching as a false gospel in view of his affluent constituency, disregarding cultural variants that necessitate divergent approaches to contextualization (Cook 2010, chap. 5). The question arises whether the gospel of health and wealth is a valid form of contextualization or a form of syncretism, mixing elements foreign to God's authoritative Word with the Christian message of salvation. Each context calls for a creative approach of translating conversion yet retaining Scripture as a filter for culture in transformational processes (Eitel 2012, 72-75). Prosperity teaching that claims automatic access to financial and physical well-being simultaneous with conversion clearly moves beyond Scriptural promises. It must be rejected as syncretism despite positive ramifications, such as initiating upward economic mobility. Instead, a claim of health and wealth can create repressive dynamics within the Christian community when the sick and poor face the charge of ungodliness or sinfulness (Brown 2014, 52-53). Parents of children with Down syndrome, for example, tell the story of harsh criticism when facing Christians who presume the ability of supernatural healing if

believers would only exert proper faith (Moore 2020, 41-42). Prosperity teachers such as Bill Johnson and Kenneth Copeland, who claim the ability to heal Down syndrome, instigate such attitudes within Christian communities (Fongang 2016; tedthought 2017).

Nevertheless, "pluralistic shades" of the prosperity gospel and the reality that many prosperity teachers remain within Christian orthodoxy should caution critics from hasty condemnations (Yong 2012, 16; Bowman 2001, 225-28). The Atibaia Statement by the Lausanne Consultation states well that the varieties of prosperity theologies in particular contexts "require a more nuanced response to its manifestations around the world" (Lausanne Movement 2014). Hope Center in Berlin is an example of a church that teaches prosperity yet retains an evangelical call to conversion and transformation. In that sense, HCB did not teach a false gospel. Moreover, the church pursued the most substantial efforts to initiate social improvement within and beyond their socially disadvantaged constituency. A learner's attitude about differing contextualization approaches needs to replace sweeping judgments of churches that apply prosperity teaching (Tennent 2007, 189).

The case studies revealed additional aspects of translating the health and wealth gospel that caution premature categorizations. ConnectKirche Erfurt disclosed that it is not necessary to follow prosperity teaching so that converts experience social improvements. Gospel Church Munich demonstrated that the expectation of God's supernatural intervention on behalf of suffering believers is not limited to Pentecostal churches. In the end, human suffering is inevitable in a fallen world, and Indian scholar Ken Gnanakan (2012, chap. 7) argues convincingly for a theology that addresses "human suffering here and now." The problem of evil in the world necessitates the training of church leaders in how to counsel Christian communities when facing hardships, helping believers to integrate suffering as a joyful component in the process of Christian transformation (Jas 1:2-3, Rom 5:3-5; Nidever 2008, 270-71).

## Conclusion

Each church plant in this multi-case study translated the gospel of health and wealth differently while preserving an evangelical understanding of conversion and transformation. The background and theological training of church leaders and the social context of each congregation directed the divergent approaches to contextualization. Converts applied the interpretation of prosperity to their transformational changes following the guidance of their respective churches.

Prosperity teaching with its claim of health and wealth as a Christian birthright must be rejected as syncretism. Nonetheless, careful theological assessments should prevent hasty condemnations of variations in contextualization. Christian leaders in Germany face the challenge of evaluating the theological expressions of new evangelical movements, as represented by the three case study churches, and guiding their congregations toward increasing biblical faithfulness in transformational changes (Eph 4:13).

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## How Evangelical Churches in the Chicago Metro Area are Engaging Muslim Communities

Currently there are 1.8 billion people in the world who identify as Muslim. Next, to Christianity it is the second largest religious bloc in the world. Many Muslims reside in the Western nations of Europe, North America, and Australia. Yet, attitudes towards Muslims living in these nations are often mixed. In 2017, the Pew Forum released a study on attitudes of non-Muslims towards Muslims living in four Western European countries. The words that the participants used to describe Muslims were "violent," "fanatical," "honest," and "generous" (Lipka 2017).

Also, according to Pew, 3.45 million Muslims live in the United States. Due to factors like migration, fertility, and the youngest median age of religious groups, U.S. Muslims are projected to double in number by 2050 (Lipka 2017). Yet, on a "feeling thermometer" where Americans were asked to rate nine different religious groups on a scale from 0 (coldest) to 100 (warmest) Muslims were given one of the lowest ratings at 48 degrees. At least one reason for this is "About half of Americans (49%) think at least 'some' U.S. Muslims are anti-American" (Lipka 2017). This is even though around 55% of Americans believe that there is little or no support for extremism among U.S. Muslims (Lipka 2017).

Likewise, American evangelicals also seem to harbor attitudes towards Muslims that are primarily negative. In 2015, LifeWay surveyed 1000 protestant pastors both evangelical and mainline. It found that "two-thirds of Protestant pastors agree Christianity and Islam should seek to coexist in America" (Green 2015). But it also discovered that evangelical pastors viewed Islam as "a violent and dangerous faith," whereas mainline pastors used words like "peace, love and compassion" to describe Islam (Green 2015).

While 9/11 and other terrorist attacks loom large as a source for negative attitudes towards Muslims among evangelicals, two other issues are also possible explanations for the friendship gap that evangelicals have with Muslims. The first is the relationship that American evangelicals have with the persecuted church around the world. David Cashin comments, "It has to do with the fact that the evangelical church is in touch with Christian churches in the Muslim world. More than any other religious group, they're hearing the horror stories" (Shellnutt 2017, 14). Indeed, according to "The World Watch List 2020," a list of countries around the world where Christians are the most persecuted which is published by Open Doors, Islamic Oppression is given as the reason for persecution in 31 out of the top 50 countries mentioned (Open Doors 2020).

The second issue has to do with the freedom that Muslims have to spread their faith and seek converts in the U.S. and other Western countries, but the favor is not returned in Muslim majority countries. Many times, Christians are not free in Muslim lands to do evangelism and plant churches. Also, often Muslims who do convert, even in Western countries, are threatened with death for leaving Islam to become a Christian (Redman 2010, 141-142).

These are certainly valid issues to regard and navigate in relationships with Muslims, but they do not negate the real need for evangelical Christians to overcome their negative attitudes and engage American Muslims. The motivation for this outreach is firmly grounded in Scripture, which evangelicals hold up as their final authority for all matters related to their faith. Examples of this are the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 to make disciples of people from all nations and the Great Commandment to love God and love our neighbor in Matthew 22:37-40. Thus, evangelical doctrine founded on the Bible should move local churches to embrace their Muslim neighbors.

One recent study highlights what can happen when the local church moves beyond its fears and reaches out to Muslims. The report was conducted by Fruitful Practice Research, a group that studies ministry practices in the Muslim world, in conjunction with Tyndale Intercultural Ministry (TIM) Center at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto, Canada. It is entitled "Fruitful Practices in Ministry to the North American Muslim Diaspora: A Mixed-Methods Study." The researchers for this study interviewed 18 former Muslims who became Christians while living in North America. It suggests that the two top reasons for Muslims coming to Christ were an experience

with a local evangelical church and a relationship with a Christian friend (Kronk, Daniels, Chapman, and Watson 2017, 9). Furthermore, three quarters of the 173 participants in this study who work with converts from Islam did so in "the context of a 'western', non-Muslim background convert church" (Kronk, Daniels, Chapman, and Watson 2017, 9).

The Fruitful Practices study indicates that local evangelical congregations need to learn best practices for engaging the Muslim community, so that more of them will trust in Christ and grow in their faith. This article is a summary of a larger research project focusing on how evangelical congregations in the Chicago Metro area overcame their hesitations and reached out to the Muslim communities in their locale. It explored a main research question: how are specific local evangelical churches in the Chicago Metro area engaging local Muslim communities?  Along with the two additional questions, (1) what are some of the challenges that these local churches encountered when engaging Muslims?  And (2) what lessons can be learned from the experiences of these congregations when mobilizing churches to engage Muslims?

## Ministry Context and Methodology

The ministry context for this study was seven evangelical churches in the Chicago metro area that were engaging local Muslim communities. The Chicago area was the focus because of the large Muslim community living in the metropolitan area. As one study estimates, there are at least 90 Sunni and Shi'ite mosques in the Greater Chicago area (Bagby 2011, 6). Garbi Schmidt describes Chicago as an "American Medina" after the second holiest city in Islam.  She comments:

> The "medina" in this book is Chicago, a city in the heartland of the United States where Muslims from all parts of the globe have settled. To these immigrants, Chicago is an American medina. In this city, they are creating a new home, combining habits of their homelands with an America way of life. In this city, they practice Islam and establish mosques, schools, and colleges (Schmidt 2004, 1).

Multiple case study methods were used to research these seven churches and their interactions with Muslim communities for three reasons. First, this research project examined how local churches are engaging Muslim communities. Second, this is a multiple case study design because it involved studying more than one single church interaction and examined seven. Finally, case study methodology was chosen due to its

reliance on triangulation where multiple sources of converging data are used to study a particular phenomenon (Yin 1994, 13). In this study the types of data collection included face to face semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and documentary evidence.

The churches in this project were mostly in suburban Chicago with one urban church being represented. These churches were chosen because they met the "Defining Evangelicals in Research" protocols developed by the National Association of Evangelicals and Life Way Research (NAE 2017) which include:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation (NAE 2017).

Each of these churches have dedicated ministry teams comprised of church members and regular attenders, and/or church leadership (pastors, elders, and staff) who are actively involving their congregation in outreach to a local Muslim community or communities. The following table gives a brief description of the churches selected for this study.

Table 1 – Churches Selected

| Church | Description | Length of Engagement |
|--------|-------------|----------------------|
| Church A | Multi-site suburban church. | 3 years |
| Church B | Medium sized suburban congregation of 200-220. | 3 years |
| Church C | Large two service suburban congregation of 700. | 3.5 years |
| Church D | Small suburban congregation of approximately 40-50. | 5 years |
| Church E | Medium sized suburban congregation of 250. | 12 years |
| Church F | Small urban church plant of 20-25. | 3 months |
| Church G | Suburban mega church with two campuses of 3000. | 10 years |

The interviews were qualitative face to face semi-structured interviews. There was a total of 21 persons interviewed in this study with 13 being men and 8 being women. Their ages ranged from their early forties to late sixties, and they included three ethnic minorities, two of which were first generation immigrants from non-Muslim backgrounds. The criteria for those who participated were their evangelical commitment, leadership and/or regular involvement in their church's engagement with a local Muslim community. A greater emphasis was placed on those who have launched or are giving the primary leadership to these initiatives.

To protect the anonymity of those who took part in the interviews, each person was assigned letters, a number, and an additional letter indicating the church case to which they belonged in analyzing the interviews.  Thus, the female leader from church A would be FL1A, the male leader from church B would be ML1B, a male volunteer from church C would be MV1C, a female volunteer from church D would be FV1D, etc. The designation of leader was given to those who launched and were responsible for the managing and direction of the ministry. The designation volunteer was assigned to those who were regularly involved in their church's relationship and outreach efforts to the Muslim community. The following table offers a description of those who were interviewed.

Table 2 – Interviewees

| Case | Identifier | Age | Length of time involved | Details |
|------|-----------|-----|------------------------|---------|
| Church A | FL1A | 50–60 | 3 years | Former missionary in South Asian Muslim country. |
| | MV1A | 60–70 | 2 years | Retiree. Had Muslim friend prior to involvement. |
| | FV1A | 50–60 | 3 years | Certified ESL teacher, lived in the Middle East. |
| Church B | ML1B | 50s | 3 years | First generation South Asian immigrant. Outreach Director. |
| | FV1B | 60s | 6 months | Had a Muslim friend prior to involvement. |
| | FV2B | 50–60 | 7 months | Former missionary in Europe in non-Muslim context. |
| Church C | ML1C | 40s | 3.5 years | Former missionary in Europe in Muslim context. Pastor of Global Mission. |
| | MV1C | 40–50 | 10 months | Has an orphan ministry in Africa. Son of European immigrants. |
| | FV1C | 40–50 | n/a | First generation Asian immigrant. |
| Church D | ML1D | 30s | 5 years | Former missionary in Africa in Muslim context. Church elder. |
| | FV1D | 60s | n/a | Messianic Jew. |
| | MV1D | 40s | 2 years | Short term missions in Europe in Muslim and Hindu context. Church elder. |
| Church E | ML1E | 50s | 12 years | Short term missions in Haiti and Mexico. Associate Pastor. |
| | ML2E | 60–70 | 12 years | Missionary in Latin America, Europe, and Middle East. |
| | MV1E | 50–60 | 12 years | Short term missions in Europe with Muslims. |
| | FV1E | 60s | 12 years | Short term missions in North Africa. |
| Church F | ML1F | 30–40 | 3 months | Urban church planter. |
| Church G | ML1G | 50–60 | 10 years | Former missionary in Asian Muslim country. Pastor of Global Outreach. |
| | ML2G | 30s | 6 years | Served with Peace Corps in African Muslim country. Director of local outreach. |
| | FV1F | 20–30 | 10 months | Previous experience working with Muslim refugees in the U.S. |
| | MV1F | 30s | 1.5 years | Previous experience working at Arabic church and Muslim refugees in the U.S. |

The participant observation aspect of the data collection involved taking notes after joining in an activity that a local church did with a Muslim community. Seven different events were observed. The following table offers some brief details about each event.

Table 3 – Events for Participant Observation

| Church | Event | Date |
|--------|-------|------|
| Church A | International Picnic | July 2019 |
| Church B | New Zealand Vigil at mosque | March 2019 |
| | Iftar Dinner at mosque | May 2019 |
| Church C | New Zealand Vigil at mosque | March 2019 |
| | Iftar Dinner at mosque | May 2019 |
| | ESL class | June 2019 |
| Church D | Event canceled | n/a |
| Church E | Advent Dinner | December 2019 |
| Church F | Interfaith Dialogue at mosque | August 2019 |
| Church G | Arab Fellowship Bible Study | October 2019 |

Both electronic and hard copy documents were obtained from ministry leaders, as well as documents that were available during participant observations. These documents included meeting minutes, Bible study notes in Arabic and English, handouts from an interfaith dialogue, Iftar dinner agenda, ministry brochure, training materials, and church email newsletters announcing activities with local Muslims.

The data collected from the interviews was analyzed using a system of coding developed from chapter seven of *Qualitative Research* by Tim Sensing. Codes for the interviews were developed based on themes and patterns discovered by a reading of the raw data and the assigning of potential codes which demonstrated the patterns. The interviews were organized into the seven primary codes of training, outreach, relationships, leadership, team, prayer, and communication.

The notes from the participant observations were used to describe the events, highlighting pertinent factors, proceeding the discussion from the interviews in each case study. The documentary evidence collected was used in a supplementary way where needed in the discussions of the interviews and participant observations.

## Findings

The themes discovered in the data collections were applied to each of the seven church case studies. These cases give a broad answer to the main research question of how local evangelical churches in the Chicago Metro area are engaging local Muslim communities. These case studies can be grouped into three different models of outreach. First is the Support Group model which is an organized ministry within the church that encourages people in the group to intentionally befriend Muslims. Second is the Organic model where outreach is infused generally into the entire congregation from a leadership level down to the congregation. The emphasis is the surrounding community and getting people in the congregation to do outreach in their personal lives. The third and final model is Represent the Church where a ministry within the church takes responsibility for reaching out to a Muslim community and identifies themselves as being from that local church. It has similar aspects to the support group model, but with the distinction that they are overt about representing the church. It is a congregation-on-congregation relationship. Since space does not permit us to look at each case study in-depth, one representative case for each of the three models will be discussed with a summary of their strengths and challenges.

### Church A – Support Group Model

This is a multi-site church with seven campuses mostly located in the Chicago suburbs. The people involved with Muslim ministry primarily came from two suburban campuses. They had been engaging Muslims for three years at the time this study was conducted.

This ministry exceled in at least four ways in engaging local Muslims. First, they offered support in the form of monthly meetings where training was conducted along with prayer and encouragement for the relationships that they had with Muslim friends. This was also seen in how they planned and performed outreaches together, thus giving an opportunity to minister to Muslim acquaintances collectively.

Second, was the intentionality that they displayed in ministry. This was evidenced by how they invested in their friendships with Muslims by visiting them in their places of business, as well as in the hospital. Another way that this intentionality was seen was in how the members of this group shared their faith with Muslim friends. This was done through praying with them, sharing scripture with them, and engaging their Muslim friends in gospel conversations.

Third, they practiced hospitality and were also willing to receive it from Muslims. At a picnic they hosted respect for Muslim dietary restrictions was shown by serving halal meat. Also, they maintained separation of genders which showed that they were willing to accommodate their Muslim friends by honoring this custom. The practice of gift giving at the picnic and holiday parties combined hospitality with sharing their faith, as the gifts given either included scripture or pointed to a Bible story.

Fourth, they had an ethnically diverse ministry team including some Muslim Background Believers (MBB), as well as others. This diversity showed that the gospel is for all people and not just one ethnic group. This helps to dispel the perception that Christianity is only for westerners which is sometimes a stumbling block for Muslims.

A particular challenge for this ministry was a lack of recognition within the church. This was because publicity was not widely circulated due to security concerns. Given that this is a multi-site church the lack of internal publicity was a hinderance to spreading their influence on other campuses where people might also have contact with Muslims.

### Church B – Organic Model

This church is a medium sized suburban congregation with an attendance of 200-220 on a Sunday morning. They had also been engaging Muslims for three years at the time of this study.

There were five practices that church B did that were effective in their relationship with the local mosque. First, the leader created opportunities for his congregation to interact with Muslims. This was seen in planning events like a Thanksgiving dinner and a Feed My Starving Children work project, both done in conjunction with the mosque community.

Second, he was intentional about modeling how to build a friendship with the Imam, as well as other Muslims. This relationship ranged from personal interactions to

publicly advocating for issues that the Muslim community was concerned about like attending a vigil for shootings that took place at mosques in New Zealand.

Third, this congregation was committed to prayer. This was evidenced by their taking the first Sunday of each month to pray for an hour for outreach in the community including among Muslims, instead of teaching Sunday School. It was also seen in how the leader encouraged his people to be constant in prayer in their own lives as they reached out to Muslims and others.

Fourth, like church A they practiced and received hospitality. Once again, holidays, like Thanksgiving and Easter, were used to extend hospitality and share Christ with Muslim friends. Yet, this relationship was reciprocal in that they also responded to a Muslim invitation for hospitality by attending an Iftar dinner during Ramadan.

Fifth, the ministry events and opportunities were communicated well to the congregation. Several venues were used and combined with announcements at prayer meetings and on Sunday mornings. These all served to make clear what activities were available with the Muslim community.

This church had some committed volunteers and events were well attended, but there were two main challenges that arose with respect to volunteers. First, at least two of the main volunteers interviewed for this study had not received any training. The second involved the age of the volunteers. While it was mentioned that a couple seminary students were involved, one interviewee stated that most of those involved were over fifty. Challenges like this one can produce a problem for long term sustainability of a ministry since younger people are not involved.

### Church E – Represent the Church

This is a medium sized suburban congregation with an attendance of around 250. They had been engaging a local mosque for twelve years at the time of this study.

The intentionality that this church displayed in engaging this mosque was prominent in three ways. First, they made initial contact with the Muslim community by simply walking down the street and meeting the Imam at the mosque. Second, they conducted multiple events with the Muslim community and had them frequently. This included everything from an annual Advent dinner to interfaith dialogues to work projects to small groups.

The third way that this church demonstrated intentionality was in how they shared their faith. As one leader said the devotionals at the Advent dinner were a vehicle for sharing the gospel. Others on the team took the opportunity to share scripture with their Muslim friends when the occasion arose. Finally, the singing of Christmas Carols was another way that this ministry used to share their faith.

Another aspect to this ministry was the compassionate friendship that they enjoyed with the mosque. Their twelve-year relationship evolved into them using familial language to describe their Muslim neighbors. Out of the shared experiences that these two communities had the church walking with the mosque through a split was the greatest demonstration of the depth of their friendship.

There were two aspects that this ministry shared with each previous case. First, they practiced and received hospitality. This was seen by their hosting the annual Advent dinner, as well as attending an annual Iftar dinner. Second, the team members all had previous cross-cultural ministry experience.

While this ministry saw a lot of success, there were three areas that posed challenges.  First, there was inconsistency in training. In the beginning, training opportunities were abundant and proved helpful in equipping people and changing their attitudes, but none had been offered recently. Second, they struggled to develop young new leaders. This might also be the result of not offering consistent training from which to recruit for the ministry. As we saw above, this problem leaves the future of the ministry in doubt. A fear of jeopardizing the relationship with the mosque over a Muslim who is interested in following Christ, was the final challenge facing this ministry. It was clear that those involved want their Muslim friends to know Christ, but the uncertainty of what this would do to the deep friendship they have was a concern.

## Conclusions and Implementation

The conclusions of the findings were derived by offering a cross-case analysis that answers the two additional questions. The first question is what are some of the challenges that these local churches encountered when engaging Muslims? The second question is what lessons can be learned from the experiences of these congregations when mobilizing churches to engage Muslims? Suggestions for how local churches can implement ways to navigate the challenges and employ the insights from the lessons are also offered.

**Challenges Encountered**

While challenges were found in each of the cases discussed in the findings, when all the cases were considered together, five general challenges were discovered that these local churches encountered when engaging Muslims.

*Lack of Training*

In a number of cases several committed volunteers reported having no formal training. This was true for people involved with ESL, hospitality, and other outreaches even though they recognized their need for it. While several of the churches in this study offered training, at least for some of these volunteers it was done before they got involved. Commenting on an experience she had at an Easter Tea one woman said, "When we got to the Easter Tea, she [the Christian leader] asked if I could open in prayer and I thought well, but sure is it okay to pray in Jesus name? What am I supposed to say? Are there things I shouldn't say? I want to know how to be sensitive to our guests and I want to be appropriate, but in terms of training no" (FV2B).

Thus, it seems that training plays a vital role not only as a tool for recruiting and equipping new people, but also in preparing already committed volunteers. Therefore, a regular rhythm for training should be developed, to make sure that all who are involved are being set up for a successful ministry experience. Several curricula mentioned in this study, such as *Bridges, Journey to Jesus*, and *Al Massira* could prove helpful in establishing a regular schedule for training.

*Involvement of Young Volunteers*

The regular involvement of congregants in their 30s and 40s also emerged as a challenge for these churches. The reasons cited for this were distance to travel for ministry, having young families, scheduling conflicts due to busyness, and lack of a clear pathway to bring new people onto the ministry team. Among these reasons the most concerning were the objections to evangelism and inviting Muslims to become followers of Christ given by people at church D. The leader of this ministry described one attitude in his church as "why do you want to do this and are you going to, sort of, evangelize and push religious crusade on them in some degrees?" (ML1D). Unfortunately, this coheres with a recent study conducted by the Barna group that showed 47% of Christian millennials "agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith" (Barna Group 2019).

This is where robust biblical teaching on evangelism topics like the Great Commission is needed. This combined with a way to intentionally disciple young people in Muslim ministry may help in getting more of them involved.

*Barriers to Commitment*

We have already noted that distance and busyness were hinderances to getting younger congregants involved. These two factors also proved to be barriers for getting congregants involved generally. Giving American volunteers specific time-oriented tasks that they can plan in their schedules may help in navigating the issue of busyness, and if given enough time and notice it may also help to alleviate the barrier of distance.

An additional obstacle to commitment was that the ministry was not promoted well within the congregation. As one leader shared, "I feel like there hasn't been a whole lot of PR for it at our church. And like I said that's partly because of security things. At one time when we had something going on and they put it as a banner on our website 'Muslim outreach.' Ok, that's probably not the best plan.  I think that kind of put a damper on the PR part of it" (FL1A).

Perhaps involving the church in a congregation wide effort to pray for Muslims, such as the *30 Days of Prayer* campaign that church C used, could be one way to create awareness of Muslim ministry generally. Also, regular prayer requests for the specific ministry that the church is doing could be communicated through the church newsletter. This could help to solve the problems of security, since the newsletter is circulated only to congregants, and promotion because people would be made aware of the prayer needs of the ministry on a regular basis. An extra step of cautioning people not to share these requests beyond the congregation could be added to alleviate security concerns.

A lack of commitment was not only witnessed on the church side, but also proved to be a barrier on the Muslim side. Speaking of his church's experience one leader said, "So, our folks want to have more involvement with them than they want to have with us . . . You know, there is no sort of desire to continue relationship really . . . there just wasn't a vision for building on that" (ML1D). Regarding this lack of reciprocity on behalf of the Muslims, despite the efforts of Christians to befriend them, it seems that the only option here is to pray that God would open a new path for engagement.

*Fear*

Fear was another obstacle that these local churches encountered when engaging a Muslim community. There were four specific types of fear mentioned in this study. First, it was the attitude of some congregants that Muslims are dangerous. Second, there was a fear that they might offend a Muslim person because they were not sure how to conduct themselves in a relationship with one. Third, as reported by church E, was the concern that the relationship with a Muslim community could end if one of them decided to follow Christ. Last, there was an internal struggle among Muslims and MBBs about what would happen to them if they decided to follow Christ and their family found out. A leader at church G that has an Arab Bible Study recounted a Syrian convert saying that he feared what his family would do if they found out he was now a Christian.

The first two fears mentioned can be rectified by adequate training and creating opportunities for Muslims and Christians to meet face to face. The interviews showed that the outreach events these churches conducted had a transformative effect on the attitudes of the volunteers and the congregation. As one volunteer at church C commented, "I can tell you for those who are directly involved it's absolutely been transformative for us" (MV1C). Thus, it seems that hosting events where Christians and Muslims can interact face to face is one of the best ways to change negative attitudes.

A possible way to navigate the third fear of jeopardizing the relationship is to do what a leader at church E suggested by forming partnerships with other churches outside the relationship with the Muslim community and encourage Muslim seekers to visit these churches. Thus, developing partnerships with other local churches or individual Christians might be a way to help those seeking in this context without jeopardizing the relationship with the mosque.

The final issue of a MBB's conversion and his/her family is more complicated, yet advice from two Muslim ministry practitioners may prove helpful. Phil Parshall suggests, "If a Muslim becomes a believer, he should be urged to witness quietly and carefully to his friends and family.  If necessary, he may have to share his faith more by deed than by word" (Parshall 2003, 199).  Roland Muller highlights the importance of a supportive Christian community: "New believers from Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds need support, friendship-discipleship, a place of refuge, and much more. If it is not apparent that these things are available in the body of Christ he or she may turn away from the Gospel" (Muller 2015, 145). Therefore, looking for subtle ways that a MBB can share his newfound faith with his Muslim family and friends, and the support of a loving Christian community may help to navigate this internal struggle.

*Tension*

In some situations where Scripture was taught, or theological issues were discussed, moments of tension arose between Muslims and Christians. After one leader shared a short devotional about Jesus' death on the cross at a barbeque, a Muslim man "started arguing and saying, 'you people are so conceited, and you think you have the only answer' . . . that whole thing cut them off and they didn't want to talk to me anymore" (FL1A). In the Arab Bible Study, some of the MBBs in the group were keen to point out at times that "The Qur'an is not correct.' And when that happens then there is a big defense that pops up to want to defend the Qur'an, to defend their Muslim faith" (ML2G).

When dealing with these tense situations, it is important for Christians and Muslims to realize that these moments are inevitable in their relationship. While we do have some doctrinal beliefs in common, such as monotheism, belief in divine revelation, and the final judgment, there are other deeply held theological convictions that are in conflict, such as the prophethood of Muhammad and the deity of Christ, that will emerge in these relationships. These doctrines are foundational to their respective faiths and thus, unless a conversion takes place, they cannot be compromised. In these interfaith relationships Christians and Muslims will have to learn to respectfully agree to disagree, while at the same time trying to understand why those on the other side hold these convictions so strongly.

**Lessons**

As with the challenges just discussed, taking all the case studies into consideration, there were seven overall lessons to be learned from the experiences of these congregations when mobilizing churches to engage Muslims.

*Intentionality*

A phenomenon that occurred across the categories of training, outreach, and relationships was that these churches were intentional about engaging Muslims. It is interesting to note that six out of the seven churches in this study initiated the relationships that they had with Muslims.

A leader at church E explained why the relationship his church had with the mosque had endured, "it required a lot of intentionality. It's not just something that you do

casually. You have to do it very intentionally . . . It won't happen by accident and the momentum could be lost very quickly. So, we've just been extremely intentional and very helped by the Lord" (ML2E).  Given the fact that evangelical churches are far more numerous than mosques in the United States it is more likely that churches will need to be the initiator in the relationship.

*Multiple Approaches*

The different ways that churches initiated with Muslims, the variety of outreaches, the types of teams, the different ways that prayer was practiced, and the various ways of communicating with the congregation all point to the fact that there is no one way to reach out to a Muslim community, but that there are multiple approaches. When deciding what type of strategic model will fit their church best, a congregation can consider the Organic, Support Group, and Represent the Church models discussed and adopt one, or again use these as a guideline and create their own model.

*Practiced and Received Hospitality*

Another lesson to be learned from the churches in this study was that they both practiced and received hospitality. This phenomenon was seen across all the case studies. Many of the events that the churches hosted took place around holidays especially Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. The most popular ways that they received hospitality were either an invitation to a Muslim home or attending an Iftar dinner. This highlights that holidays are a great avenue for both extending hospitality to Muslims and receiving it from them. Furthermore, traditional holidays provide rich opportunities for sharing our faith in multiple ways. A pastor described the devotional he shares at an annual Advent dinner as "An open door to share the gospel" (ML1E).  He continued:

> Every year I'm sharing openly the gospel in various ways. One time it was from focusing more on Mary because there is so much on Mary. One time it was focusing on John the Baptist because there is so much about John the Baptist. Another time it was more of an Advent yearning for the kingdom of God to come because of all of those Advent themes of peace and joy and justice and love, fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. (ML1E)

These churches also displayed a willingness to honor their Muslim guests by adhering to their dietary restrictions and providing lavish meals for them to enjoy. These abundant meals were also provided by the Muslims when receiving Christians as

their guests. It is also worth noting that many of these hospitality events took place in houses of worship, showing that church facilities and mosques are places that Christians and Muslims are willing to attend to extend and receive hospitality. The willingness of Christians to enter a Muslim house of worship for the purpose of receiving hospitality shows that they respect their Muslim neighbors and are willing to enter an unfamiliar space to be in relationship with them. The converse is also true when Muslims enter a church building for the purpose of extending friendship to Christians and experience hospitality from them.

## Compassionate Friendship

The churches that had formed relationships with Muslim communities over several years had a compassionate friendship with them. This means that these Christians took to heart issues that concerned their Muslim neighbors to the point that some of them even used familial language, as noted above. Commenting on their long-term relationship, one volunteer at church E said that those in the mosque community were "family now for me" (FV1E). She continued, "I care about their families. I go to funerals . . . I love them enough now and now I'm going to tell them about Christ and now I'm going to go deeper because now I love them" (FV1E).

This compassionate friendship also manifested itself in two ways when Muslims and Christians worked together. The first was when they did joint work projects together serving both the local community and charities around the world. Second it was observed in the peaceful and harmonious relationships that they had formed with one another. The importance of this latter manifestation was mentioned by the imam at church E's Advent dinner who believed that an intentional peaceful relationship with Christians, like the one his mosque had with the church, could have prevented the civil war that took place in his own country. Both are also demonstrations of how Christians can work together with Muslims on issues of public concern. Perhaps most of all it gives Christians the opportunity to live out the teaching of Jesus, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matt 5:9), thus creating a more peaceful community in the present and setting an example for the next generation.

## Bible is Central

The use of biblical references was also present across cases and was seen in multiple venues from gift giving to personal conversations to devotionals and interfaith talks.

This reflects an evangelical value of the authority of Scripture and a desire to share it with Muslim friends because of its ability to make them "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15). One leader in church E's relationship with the mosque described them as "Sufi leaning." In sharing scripture with them he said, "we can really hit common ground when we talk about things like the Beatitudes. The taming the ego and loving God. All those kind of things . . . we can introduce scripture to them . . . We try to be very careful, any opening we ever have to say this is what our scripture says we read it right there and then" (ML2E).

It is worth pointing out that the Arab Bible study at church G was the only ministry that had seen Muslims become followers of Christ. The centrality of Scripture in these ministries demonstrates that Christians should use multiple avenues in introducing the Bible to their Muslim friends, especially if it involves a prolonged study of the Bible together. It is also incumbent upon Christians who have such opportunities to understand the beliefs and concerns of their Muslim neighbors and teach on scripture passages which speak to them.

*Experienced Motivated Team*

Another picture that emerged from the interviews and participant observations was that the ministry teams interacting with Muslims were experienced and motivated. Five of the nine leaders were former overseas missionaries who served among Muslims, one worked for a humanitarian organization in a Muslim country, and another was a first-generation immigrant.

The volunteers involved in these ministries (8 out of 12) reported having previous cross-cultural experience. Hearing how many of these volunteers described their own involvement it also seemed as if they were motivated for what they were doing. This experience and motivation was evident at several of the events that I attended where these teams navigated cultural issues adeptly and made sacrificial efforts to make these events happen. These also seemed to be elements that have sustained some of these ministries over the long haul, especially those who have been engaging Muslims for a decade or more like churches E and G. Thus, local churches would be served in identifying those in their congregation with long term overseas ministry experience when launching an outreach to a local Muslim community.

According to our present study, this would not only be true for those who have served as long-term missionaries, but also for those who have had any type of cross-cultural service. Perhaps those with longer term service should be looked to for leadership and those with shorter amounts of experience as initial volunteers.

One other aspect that contributed to the motivation of some of these teams was the support of the senior pastor or pastoral staff. Thus, even teams with experience and motivation are greatly encouraged when they sense that the pastoral staff are behind them.

*Faith is Foundational*

A final lesson that followed from this study was that the relationships that these Muslims and Christians formed were based on their respective faiths. This was evident in how those interviewed described conversations, as well as ones that I participated in. The conversations at my table during an Advent dinner ranged from family life to politics to faith. A genuine concern was voiced for raising children as religious conservatives in a culture that is struggling with gender fluid issues and seemingly devaluing traditional families. One Muslim man who had a six-month-old son asked me and another Christian at the table how we navigate the commercialization of Christmas with our kids. I shared that traditions and values need to be communicated with intentionality to children. It gave me an opportunity to talk about the family Advent calendar that my wife and I do with our kids to inculcate faith and teach them about the birth of Christ. The Muslim man seemed to appreciate that answer as to how we are intentional about communicating our faith to our children.

Another way that this was observed was in some of the social practices of the Muslims, namely, women wearing hijabs and the boundaries observed between opposite genders. While it is true, as noted earlier, that there can be moments of tension due to our respective faiths, it is also true that there is a uniting aspect as Christians and Muslims can come together around a shared conviction that faith is foundational to their identities. This is an observation that should encourage local evangelical churches to freely represent their faith as they interact with local Muslim communities, while affording their Muslim neighbors the same opportunity.

## Conclusion

The aim of this project was to study how specific evangelical congregations in the Chicago Metro area are engaging Muslim communities, so that other evangelical churches can learn from their experiences and be encouraged to do the same. It is my hope that other evangelical churches can make use of this information to develop the best way forward as they seek to overcome their hesitancies, step out in faith, and reach out to Muslim communities near them with the neighbor love of Christ so that they might know him.

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Ever since C. Peter Wagner declared church planting as the greatest strategy for the spread the gospel around the world (1990), church planters have taken up the banner of what is no doubt one of the most obvious results of making disciples in the book of Acts. Indeed, Tim Keller writes, "The continual planting of new congregations is the most crucial strategy for the growth of the body of Christ" (2012). Pick up any church planting text these days and you'll hear similar remarks. In fact, Ed Stezter and Daniel Im go so as far as to say, "We are most like Christ when we join him in the mission of reaching the unchurched by planting new churches" (2011, 26).

Recent data draws into question the notion that church planting is in fact the most effective evangelistic methodology for fulfilling the Great Commission. The decline of church membership and average attendance in the US church juxtaposed to the increase number of churches and population since 2000 suggest a US church lacking in evangelism and discipleship. This essay will examine data from 1950 to 2020 that seem to lead to a conclusion which does not support the long-standing maxim claimed by Wagner, Keller, and others. The article concludes with a call to a path forward in rethinking church planting. Among the considerations are new church planting metrics, de-emphasizing Sunday morning, and a shift to movemental ecclesiology.

## The Birth of Modern Church Planting

In 1990, Wagner boldly declared in his *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest: A Comprehensive Guide* that research from 1960-1990 clearly indicated that church planting is "the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven" (1990, 11). Wagner identified 12 "good ways" to plant churches which he claimed resulted in a greater harvest. He divided them into models of modality and sodality. Modality models were the result of one church planting another church. The models Wagner believed worked were: hiving off, colonization, adoption, and accidental parenthood. These four models ultimately gain autonomy from the parent church. Additionally, satellite model,

multi-congregational churches, and multiple campus model were models which continue in relationship with the parent church. Sodality models were the result of outside organizations planting churches, either denominational or parachurch organizations. Sodality models included: mission team, catalytic church planter, founding pastor, independent church planter, and apostolic church planter (Wagner 1990, 59-74). Space does not permit a fair treatment of these models. Nevertheless, Wagner did not commend one over the other. Rather, taking a pragmatic approach, he agreed with a Rick Warren aphorism, "If you're getting the job done, I like the way you're doing it" (Wagner 1990, 59).

Wagner, coming from Fuller's School of World Mission (1971-2001), no doubt built on the work and observations of Donald McGavran, the father of the church growth movement. In 1970, McGavran identified three types of church growth. First, biological growth results from the birth of children in Christian families. Second, transfer growth results from demographic shift of Christians from one church to another. Finally, conversion growth results from non-Christians placing their faith in Jesus Christ and are added to the number of the church. He concludes that conversion growth is the only form of church growth which can spread across all segments of society (1970, 87-88).

While McGavran might be most remembered for the principles of people movements, homogenous unit principle, and harvest principle (see Ott and Wilson 2011, 71), it was his commitment to understanding church growth that inspired him to hope for more people to obey the Great Commission, study the sociological factors affecting growth, and to expect a harvest of new believers. He writes:

> Let us face the fact that the world is open to belief in Christ as widespread as is our power to proclaim Him. The Church can move forward mightily. It is God's will that she do so. His power will bless us as we devote ourselves with heart, mind and will to the multiplying of churches from earth's one end to the other (McGavran 1970, 370).

As Craig Ott and Gene Wilson point out, the church growth movement suffered harsh criticism for being "overly pragmatic, theologically shallow, and methodologically reductionistic" (2011, 71); criticism similar to those we hear today about church planting movements and disciple making movements.

Since McGavran, Wagner, and others like Win Arn, Lyle Schaller, Aubrey Malphurs, and Ed Stetzer, there has been no lapse of books on church planting growth and strategies. Most continue to claim the special position of church planting as the biblical

model. Others recognize, like J.D. Payne, that, "nowhere in the Bible is the church commanded to plant churches" (2015, 114). No matter the view of the biblical nature of church planting, the data seem to suggest a different perspective on the claim to its evangelistic effectiveness in the United States (see Infographic 1).

Infographic 1: Church Trends in the United States
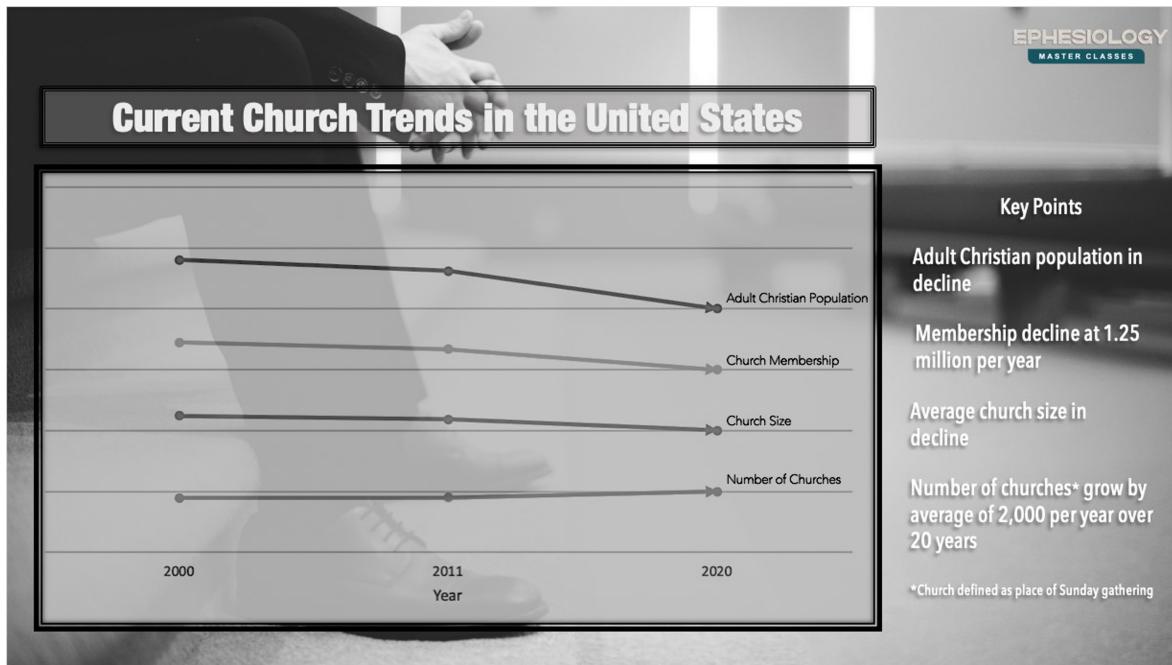


## A Look at the Data[1]

In the second edition of their popular book, *Planting Missional Churches*, Stetzer and Im provide data to suggest that the only way we will reach North America with the gospel is by planting more churches. They write:

- In 1900, there were twenty-eight churches for every 10,000 Americans
- In 1950, there were seventeen churches for every 10,000 Americans
- In 2000, there were twelve churches for every 10,000 Americans
- In 2011, the latest year available, there were eleven churches for every 10,000 Americans (Stetzer and Im, 2016, 8)[2].

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[1] Population data from the US Census Bureau (https://www.census.gov); Church membership data from Gallup (https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx); Church growth data from Stetzer and Im (2016). Note: Stetzer and Im provide no detailed reference for their data; only a citation noting that the statistics are from Rich Stanley and Paulette Villarreal who work at the Center for Missional Research at the North American Mission Board (Stetzer and Im, 2016, p. 377).

[2] Here I am using a simple formula to determine the number of churches corresponding to Stetzer and Im's claims – (US Census Bureau Population Data/10,000) * NAMB Data = Estimated number of churches. For example, the US population in 1950 was 152,300,000/10,000 = 15,230 * 17 churches per 10,000 people = 258,910 churches.

If Stetzer and Im are correct in their assessment, clearly the church to population ratio has contracted over the 110-year period of their data indicating the absence of effective evangelism and discipleship in the US church. However, and most interestingly in spite of the contraction, the total number of churches continued to grow suggesting the apparent success of church planting (see graph 1). Later in their book, Stetzer and Im optimistically declare that, "Between 1980 and 2000, more than 50,000 churches were planted in North America" (2016, 14), amounting to an average of 2,500 new churches per year. In as strong as a manner as possible, Stetzer and Im claim, "Without church planting, we will not fulfill the Great Commission" (2016, 14). So, in hopes to "inform, to clarify, to encourage, and to persuade evangelicals to embrace church planting" (2016, 14) they spend the next 350 pages putting forward their understanding of missional church planting; a book, by the way, I highly recommend.

Graph 1: US Churches between 1900-2020



**CHURCHES (1900-2020)**

- 212,825 (1900)
- 258,910 (1950)
- 338,640 (2000)
- 342,760 (2011)
- 380,000 estimated (2020)
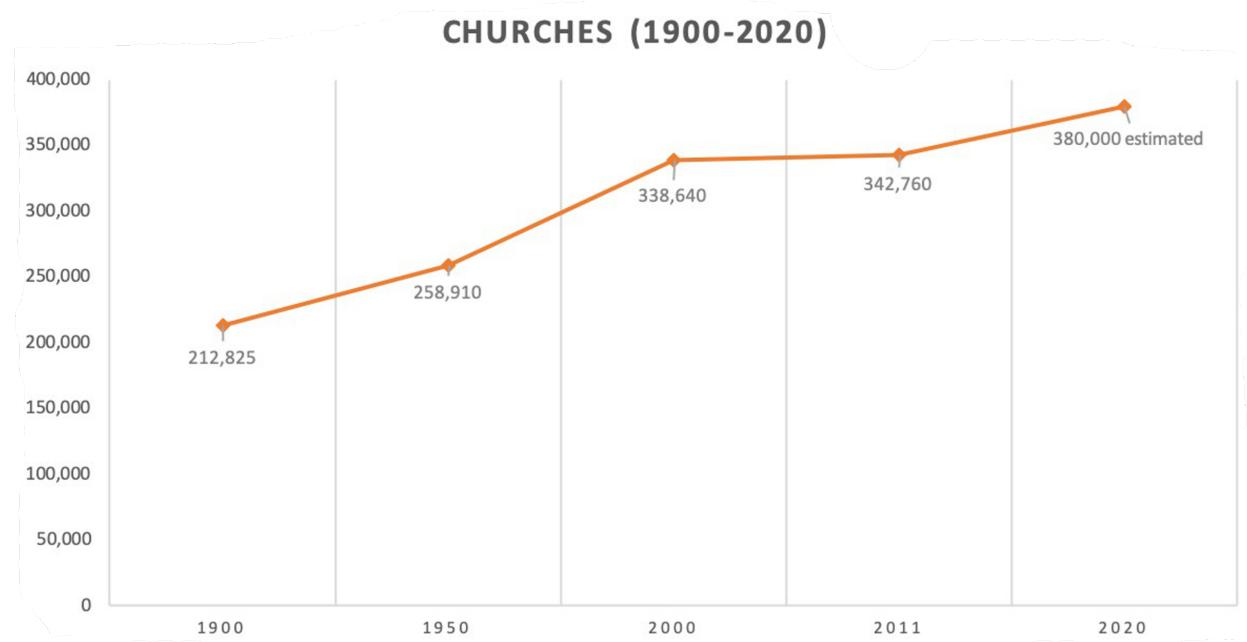
Extrapolating Stetzer and Im's data, we clearly see a growth trajectory of the number of churches started since 1900; ostensibly, the number of new church plants. In 1900, there were an estimated 212,825 churches. By 1950, the number grew to 258,910 for an average of 921 new churches per year. In another 50 years, the number of churches reached 338,640 and by 2011 we were seeing approximately 1,374 new churches per year over a sixty-one year period. Growth accelerated in 2020 when estimates placed the number of churches at 380,000 (Brauer, 2017; Goshay, 2020) for an unprecedented

nine-year average of over 4,000 new churches annually. Granted, there is a good chance that 2020 did not see 380,000 total churches primarily due to COVID-19. For example, Lifeway Research estimated that the number of church closures in 2019 outpaced the number of church openings (Earls, 2021a). Indeed, regarding the longitudinal Faith Communities Today (FACT) study, Earls comments, "In fact, more than half of churches (52%) now say they are declining by at least 5%" (Earls, 2021b; cf. Thumma, 2021).

While it is true that the number of churches in the US has grown since 1950, it is equally true that the number of US adults identifying as members of churches has been in declined since 2000. Between 1950 and 2000, the US saw the number of churches grow at an average annual rate of 0.61. During that same period of time, church membership in the US grew at an annual rate of about 1.64 while the general population of the country grew at about a rate of 1.79 annually. Despite the addition of 80,000 churches, during that 50-year period, the signs of decline in relation to population growth were present as church membership appeared to fall behind even though more churches were being started.

The National Congregations Study (Chavez and Anderson, 2014) confirms the decline of the median size of churches. In its first two waves of studies in 1998 and 2006, the median size of congregations of people who self-identified in any manner with a local church was 150. In 2012, the median number dropped to 135. When the data are narrowed to those who regularly attended the main worship service of a congregation, the median in 1998 was 70, 65 in 2006, and 60 in 2012. However, when the NCS examined responses from the perspective of congregational attendees, the data revealed that people were experiencing larger churches. Mark Chavez and Shawna Anderson note:

> The median of regularly participating adults in the average person's congregation increased from 275 in 1998 to 280 in 2006, and increased again to 301 in 2012. The median attendance at all weekend worship services at the average person's congregation increased from 325 in 2006 to 400 in 2012. (2012, 684; see graph 3)

Graph 2: State of the US Church between 1950-2020

STATE OF THE US CHURCH (1950-2020)

Membership — Population
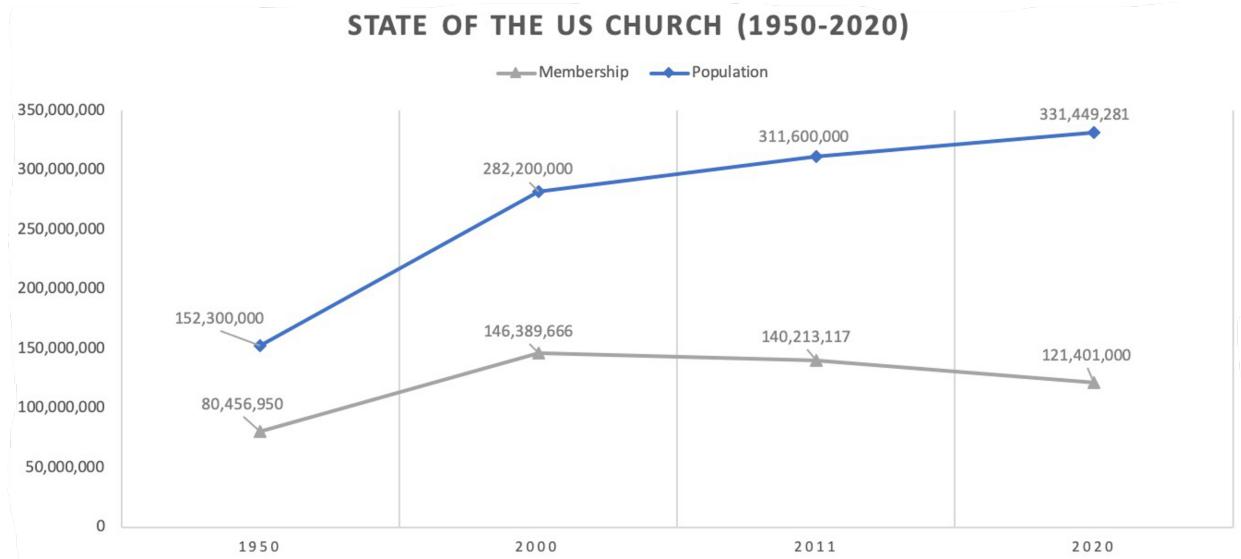


Continuing to examine Stetzer and Im's data from NAMB and estimates presented by Goshay (2020) between 2011 and 2020, the number of churches began increasing significantly at a rate of growth of 1.21. Compared to 1950-2000, it is clear that church planting saw an illusionary success with the addition of more than 4,000 churches annually. However, during the same time period (2011-2020), church membership declined at an average annual rate of -1.49. Population growth hovered right around 0.96 as it outpaced the growth of church membership by about two times. What this seems to suggest is that in spite of claims by Keller, Wagner, and others, church planting does not appear to be a strategic evangelistic method. There are clearly more churches; however, there are fewer people attending those churches. In fact, the ratio of self-identified church members to church in 2020 is nearly the same as in 1950 (see graph 3). In the meantime, the population ballooned from 152 million (1950) to 331 million (2020) further increasing the gap between population and church membership.

No doubt some might criticize the usefulness of church membership as a data point. There are certainly other Christians who do not identify as church members yet are just as faithful to attend a service on a regular basis. As Ryan Burge recently reported, nearly 25 percent of non-church members in their 1,000-respondent survey attend church once a year. His study also found that one in 10 non-church members are regular attenders of a weekly worship service (Burge, 2021). Still, church membership has long been an indicator of church health and continues to have merit.

Graph 3: Self-Identified Church Members to Number of US Churches between 1950-2020

**CHURCH MEMBERS TO NUMBER OF US CHURCHES (1950-2020)**
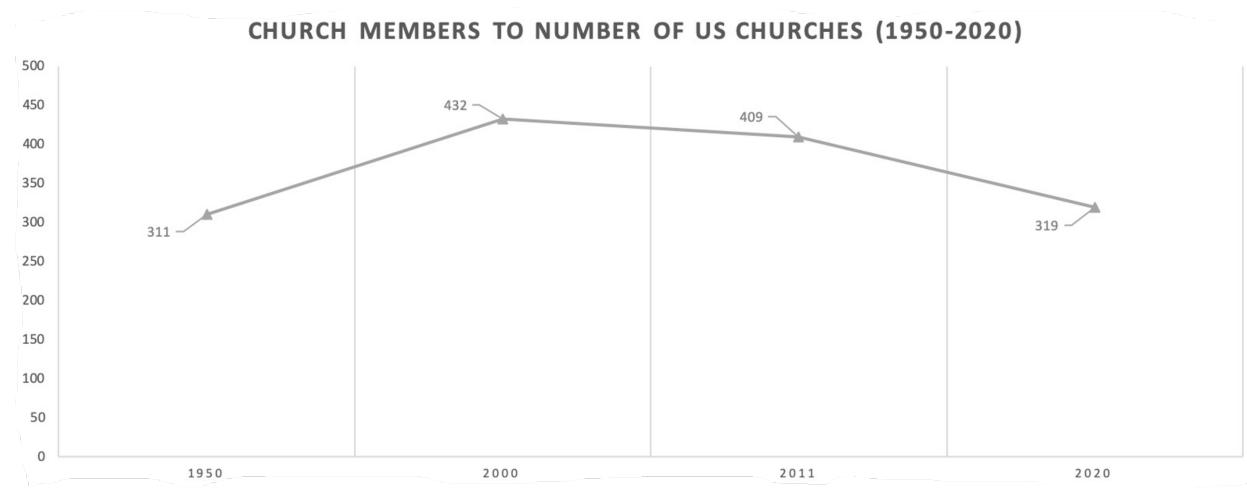


Though many build a case for the biblical priority of church planting and argue for its strategic nature, Stewart Murray states, church planting:

> [M]ay be a significant means of advancing the mission of God. It may facilitate evangelism, peace-making, action for justice, environmental concern, community development, social involvement and many other mission ventures. But it is likely to function in this way only if it is set within the right framework. Church planting seen as an end in itself, or simply as an evangelistic methodology, may fall short of its potential and distort our understanding of God's mission and the nature of God's kingdom. (2001, 26)

Now more than 20 years later, Murray seems to be correct. Church planting as an evangelistic methodology just has not held up to the accolades of the experts.

## A Path Forward

It seems clear that to move beyond the decline of Christianity in the United States, we need a shift in the manner in which we think about church planting. Continued claims of it as an evangelistic methodology also need further examination. The data discussed in this essay seems to indicate that, even though there are certainly more churches, there are fewer people attending those churches. While we might maintain the practice of church planting, here are a few considerations that could help justify it as the most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven.

*First, we need new metrics.* Church growth cannot be measured by the number of new churches planted. Nor can it be measured simply by church membership as that definition changes from church to church and, often, those numbers are Christians shifting to new congregations. Instead, church growth should be measured by the number of new Christians. Indeed, Ott and Wilson assert, "A mere numerical proliferation of small, competing, and struggling churches will not necessarily advance God's kingdom purposes" (2011, 28).

Additionally, tracking church multiplication as a result of evangelism is critical in order to achieve gospel saturation of an area. So, not only should our metric include new Christians, but also Christians sent to the harvest field. In other words, how many church members are actually participating in evangelism and discipleship, for you cannot have one without the other. Paul did not encourage Timothy to multiply churches. Instead, "What you have heard from me … entrust to *faithful people* who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2; emphasis added). As Jeff Christopherson notes, when church becomes the goal, it becomes an idolatrous pursuit (2012).

*Second, a shift in thinking about church planting.* Church planting is not about a Sunday morning service. It is about gathering together believers in Jesus Christ resulting from evangelistic activities in the community. Stetzer and Im state, "In church planting the goal isn't to plant the coolest church or do things that have never been done before, but it's always to reach people, be on mission, and be about the kingdom of God" (2016, 1). Similarly, church planting should be thought of in terms of multiplication of disciples rather than adding an additional church in a city. To get to multiplication will take movement thinkers committed to entrusting disciples to equip, empower, and inspire others to make more disciples (2 Tim 2:2). These movement thinkers will have to be analytic, catalytic, and cathartic in the manner in which they church plant (see figure 1). That is, they will need to study culture, mobilize and equip human resources, and care for the communities they engage (see Cooper, 2020).
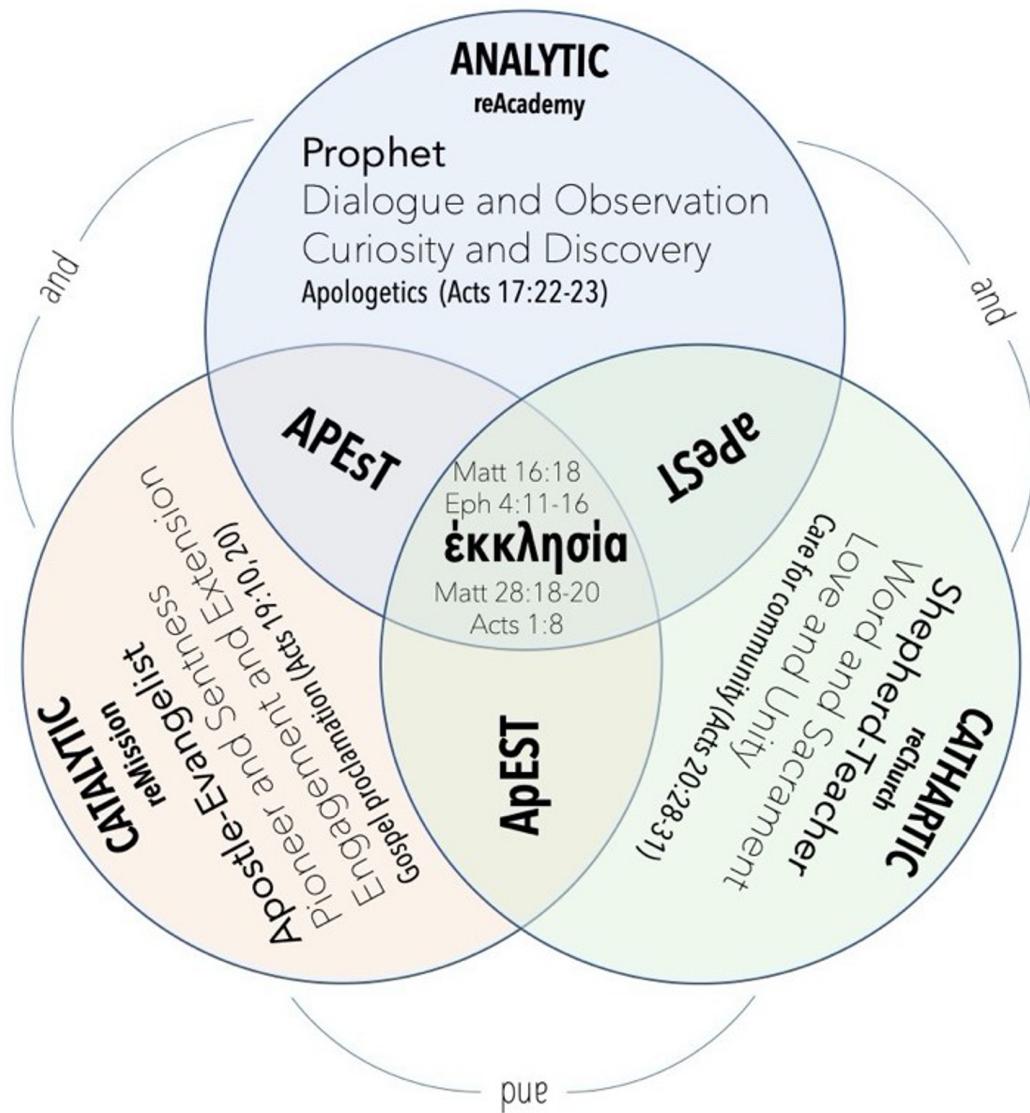
Figure 1: A Charodic Collaborative (Ephesiology)

*Third, an emphasis on the transformational nature of the church.* A church in a community should impact the community on the deepest level. First, the impact must be personal and at times communal. From such transformation emanates a complete societal transformation: economic, political, educational, healthcare, and religious. In other words, it will have what Alan Hirsch (2016) calls a movemental ecclesiology; that is, churches shaped by Jesus and his mission. Warrick Farah and Alan Hirsch (2021) suggest the following as a comparison between a typical ecclesiology and a movemental on

Table 1: A Paradigm Shift in Church Mindset (Farah and Hirsch, 2021)

| Typical Ecclesiology | Movemental Ecclesiology |
|---|---|
| • Inherited from Christendom<br>• Led by a Pastor (Top-Down Authority)<br>• Professionals do the ministry<br>• Pulpit Teaching<br>• Program-Orientation, Events<br>• Centered around a building<br>• Structure is Static/Hierarchical<br>• Reproduction is Expensive and Slow<br>• Power and Attraction<br>• Enlargement (Megachurch) | • Emerging from Christology<br>• Led by APEST, Eph 4:11 (Equipping)<br>• Everyone, according to roles and responsibility<br>• Participatory Learning<br>• Disciple-Making Orientation, Relationships<br>• Centered around an Oikos Network<br>• Structure is Organic/Flat<br>• Any Part can Reproduce the Whole<br>• Vulnerability and Service<br>• Multiplication (Church planting) |

*Fourth, a de-emphasis on Sunday morning and re-orientation to Jesus.* If you define church as a place of worship, you fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the body of Christ. Interestingly enough, when Jesus wrote to the seven churches of Asia Minor, none of his expectations for the church focused on Sunday. In fact, to be the church in the community meant to be present at all times. After all, was that not typical of our Savior? Consider for yourself Jesus' list of expectations for the 7-day per week church:

- Listens to the Holy Spirit (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29, 3:6, 13, 22)
- Confronts false teaching (Rev 2:2)
- Proclaims God's glory (Rev 2:4-5) – the works of your first love
- Stands up for the marginalized (Rev 2:6)
- Stands firm in the faith (Rev 2:13)
- Goes beyond the work of love, faith, service, endurance (Rev 2:19)
- Endures hardship (Rev 3:11)
- Keeps sound doctrine (Rev 3:3, 8, 10)

These are not Sunday morning events or programs. These are the daily opportunities to be the church in the community and they demand a re-orientation to the way of Jesus.

*Fifth, we need to understand the difference between correlation and causation.* There is little doubt that those involved in a new church plant are more likely to see new growth from evangelism than those in a legacy church (Ott and Wilson, 2011, 29). However, such growth is only a correlation with the new church plant, not the result of the new church plant. Gifted *people* plant churches. Ideally, those people are motivated to disciple-making. The result of people doing evangelism and discipleship is new growth. To say that a church plant is causing the growth is to misunderstand the nature of the priesthood of believers and leads to claims that church planting is the greatest evangelistic tool under heaven (Wagner, 1990).

The new church plant certainly is a factor among many correlating factors for growth, but it does not cause the growth. Given similar circumstances, a legacy church can see growth if they are able to activate people skilled in evangelism and discipleship. To reduce effective evangelism to church planting marginalizes the legacy church and gives her an excuse to not participate in evangelizing her community. Peyton Jones is correct, "Church planting is not the *cause* of anything in the New Testament, but rather the *effect* of carrying out the Great Commission" (2021, 14).

*Sixth, a renewed respect for the conjunctions.* Two small Greek conjunctions make all the difference in church planting: και and δε. In Acts 1:8, και links the geographical breadth of the mission of the church. When the Holy Spirit would come upon His disciples, Jesus said, "And [και] you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and [και] in all Judea and [και] Samaria and [και] to the ends of earth" (Acts 1:8; see Leston, forthcoming). It was not a progressive mission, but rather a simultaneous one. This mission is a vital part of the DNA of church planting and must be present at its beginning. Otherwise, a church plant risks becoming insular and will not multiply where there is no church. Additionally, Paul relates the means by which Jesus has equipped the church to engage every part of the world, "And [και] He gave on the one hand the apostles also [δε] the prophets also [δε] the evangelists also [δε] the shepherds and [και] teachers for the equipping of the saints for works of ministry to the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12). This APEST team works together in honor, respect, and deference to one another as they recognize Jesus as the only head of the church, not a pastor or church planter.

*Seventh, a rediscovery of what it means to adapt to culture.* In many places, church planter training as been reduced to a methodology. The method which has proven successful in producing numbers of people in church on Sunday's often becomes the model for other church plants. Rather than doing the hard work of cultural study—observation and dialogue—with a community, church planting methods become

captivated by the pragmatism of social media advertising, attractional methods to persuade people to come to church, or simply shuffling sheep from one congregation to another.

Conversely, adaptive ecclesiology recognizes the ongoing work of God among people to draw them to himself. In the missionary or church planter's work, adaptive ecclesiology sees God creating spaces for community in preparation for people joining the ἐκκλησία. Recognizing God's activity of creating spaces, adaptive ecclesiology takes what God is already doing in a community and incorporates them into the life and form of the church. Adaptive ecclesiology is naturally theocentric as it relies upon the Holy Spirit's leading in discovery God's activity in context. It is animated by the fact that God continues his active role in culture. Only in this way can the ἐκκλησία become properly incarnated as the body of Christ in a community.

Table 2: Ecclesiological Forms

| Adaptive Ecclesiology | Captive Ecclesiology |
|---|---|
| • Sees what God is doing in a culture to create community<br>  • Schools and neighborhoods<br>  • Sports and Entertainment<br>  • Voluntary organizations<br>  • Social media<br>• Adapts culturally appropriate practices as a bridge to ἐκκλησία<br>  • an ongoing process of cultural observation, dialogue, adaptation<br>  • incarnates into the community<br>• Preserves the purposes of ἐκκλησία<br>  • teaching, prayer, worship, fellowship, mission | • Starts off adapting cultural forms of a community<br>  • ex. Saddleback, Willowcreek<br>• Moves to become controlled by those forms<br>  • Performance orientation<br>  • Volunteers serve the form<br>  • Sunday-centric<br>  • Building-centric<br>• Ultimately views the forms as sacrosanct<br>  • ex. Worship wars, appropriate clothing ("Sunday best"), church programs<br>  • Church becomes captivated by itself |

Finally, a new training focused on analytic, catalytic, and cathartic church planters (figure 1). Seminaries have been great in preparing pastors, but preparing church planters is altogether different. A training that builds on and complements seminary is essential. Such a program will engage the head, heart, and hands of the church planter. It will equip church planters to analyze and adapt to culture, catalyze overlapping gospel movements (Christopherson, 2021), and care for the least of these in the community (Cooper and Moulder, 2011; Bhatia and Cooper, 2021).

## A Concluding Thought

In 1992, Malphurs predicted that "The twenty-first century church will not look the same as the typical, traditional church of the twentieth century. What has worked in the past will not work in the future" (1992, 15). Unfortunately, the reality is that the twenty-first century church looks like a nineteen-century congregation applying an ecclesiology from the sixteenth century in a context that is increasingly like the first century (Christopherson 2019). For all practical purposes, the church in general has not significantly changed in 1,700 years. Even the multiplying of new churches between 2000-2020 demonstrates that there is a serious lack of creativity in the church which has largely rendered it ineffective in her engagement of contemporary culture. Malphurs is absolutely correct when he asserts, "If a church desires to reach its generation in its culture, it must adapt its practices (not its faith) to that culture" (1992, 15).

Church planting can be an effective methodology to engage our communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The New Testament witness is clear. After the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost, a future event that Jesus had predicted (Matt 16:18), God's instrument to declare the manifold wisdom to the principalities and authorities (Eph 3:10) marched to the order of making disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18-20).

Graph 4: Growth of Christianity from 30-300AD
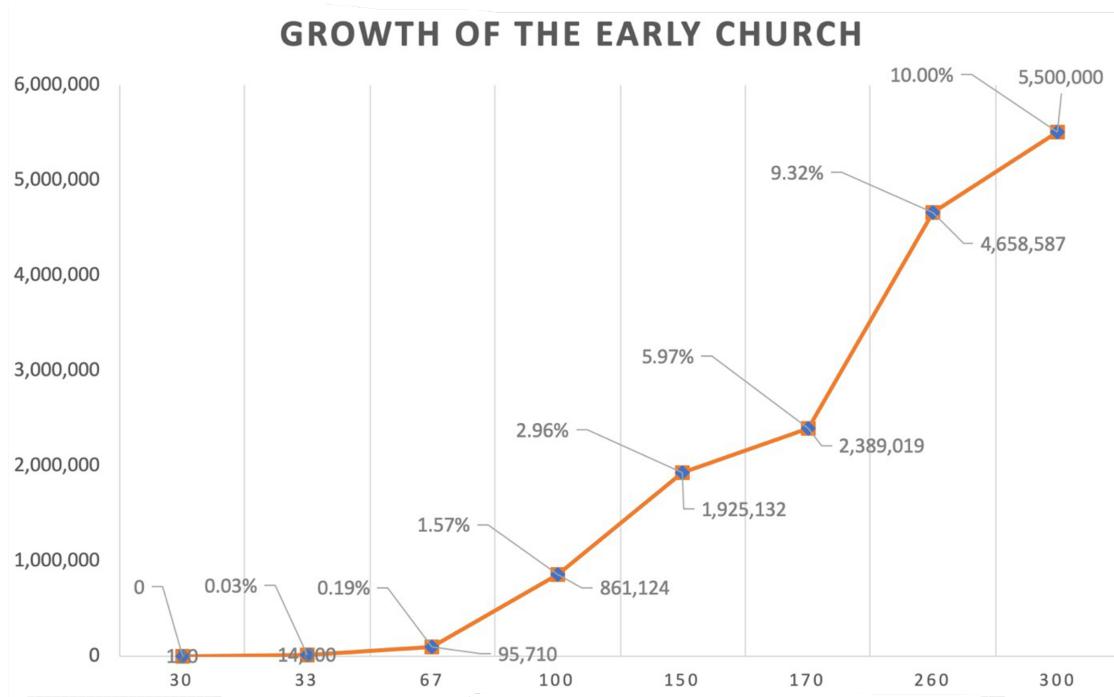
In such an astronomical trajectory of growth (see graph 4), the church was planted in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the utter most ends of the world in four decades. Eusebius, preserving a fragment from Origen's commentary on Genesis, notes:

> Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were dispersed throughout the world. Parthia, according to tradition, was allotted to Thomas as his field of labor, Scythia to Andrew, and Asia to John, who, after he had lived some time there, died at Ephesus. Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion. And at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way. What do we need to say concerning Paul, who preached the Gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and afterwards suffered martyrdom in Rome under Nero? These facts are related by Origen in the third volume of his Commentary on Genesis. (*Church History* 3.1.1)

No doubt many others followed in the footsteps of the Apostles and made disciples who congregated in churches where there was no gospel witness. And this can still happen. The Holy Spirit who empowered the disciples to be witnesses to the ends of the earth continues to empower us for the same purpose (Acts 1:8).

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Today's missionaries have means of communication available to them that previous generations of missionaries could never have imagined. They have computers, smartphones, tablets, and countless apps which let them easily communicate with the people whom they serve, the home office, their supporting churches and individuals, their banks, government officials, providers of commercial services, and other missionaries. The speed and potential efficiency of communication between people in different places far exceed what was available in the past. Yet communication through modern electronic technology comes with a cost. This cost includes the financial cost of purchasing the necessary equipment and subscriptions and, under some circumstances, a social cost when compared to the richness of face-to-face communication, as well as a psychological cost due to the stress induced by the widespread use of electronic technology.

This stress has come to be known as *technostress*, a broad term describing the "negative impact on attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, or body physiology that is caused either directly or indirectly by technology" (Weil and Rosen 1997, 5). This phenomenon describes anything from social pressure to master a new social media to the pain of installing a new printer to tensions felt by parents when their teen is using a cell phone at an inappropriate time. It occurs anytime that technology causes a person to feel uncomfortable, especially because they are not sure of how to best respond. For missionaries, technostress can be a daily occurrence, whether it be a never-empty email inbox, the use of new social media in ministry, directives from the home office to use a new app, an untimely update of an app, or the difficulties that accompany a poorly worded or missent text message.

## Stress and the Missionary

A missionary lifestyle has long been associated with stress (Loss 1983; Gish 1983; Foyle 1987). Common sources of stress include adapting to a new culture (Oberg 1960), the

pressure to change the world (Hunter 2010), living in highly urban areas (Dunaetz 2013), guilt for having a higher standard of living than most others (Carter 1999), and, as the apostle Paul said, "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28, NIV). This paper examines a relatively new source of stress, technology.

In terms of personal well-being, stress can be understood as a person's reaction to negative or potentially negative events (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). *Stressors* are events in one's environment which may be perceived as a threat. For missionaries, conversations in the local language may be a stressor. Will the missionary understand the conversation? Will he be able to respond appropriately? Will he lose face, and status, by saying something inappropriate? The degree of threat felt will vary by missionary and by situation. Missionaries at the beginning of their career might feel quite uncomfortable in a conversation whereas years later, the same type of conversation may present almost no threat now that they are fluent in the language. In Lazarus and Folman's (1984) model of stress, stress is viewed as the result of our assessment of a threat. More specifically, stress is the difference between our assessment of the potential danger of an event and our assessment of our ability to respond to the event appropriately. This can be expressed as follows:

$$\text{Our assessment of potential danger} - \text{Our assessment of our ability to respond} = \text{Stress}$$

If the danger is seen high (e.g., we might permanently damage the relationship with someone important) and our ability to respond is seen as low (e.g., we have no idea what the culturally appropriate behavior is), we will experience high stress. If the danger is seen as low (e.g., we have the opportunity to greet an old friend whom we have not seen in years) and our ability to respond is seen as high (e.g., we will greet them in a culturally appropriate way and we have time available to get caught up on all that has passed over the years), the stress will be low or non-existent.

With this model, we can see how technology may be a source of stress. We have all had experiences where technology has wasted our time, prevented us from communicating effectively, or has distracted us from more important things. These are all potential dangers. If we know how to respond to such potential dangers, we will feel little stress. But if we are not sure of the appropriate way to respond, our level of stress may increase. For example, if a financial supporter misinterprets a missionary's

Facebook post and writes a negative comment, the missionary may not know how to respond. In this case, the missionary will experience stress.

In terms of work responsibilities, stress can be viewed as the difference between job demands (what we believe we are supposed to be doing) and the resources that we have (Bakker, Demerouti, and Verbeke 2004; Salanova, Llorens, and Cifre 2013). These resources might be specifically work-related, such as financial support provided by churches and individuals and the training that one's mission provides to missionaries newly arrived on the field, or they may be personal resources, such as one's relationship with God or one's knowledge, skills, and resources. When the job demands exceed our resources, we experience stress which can eventually lead to burnout. So, to the degree that missionaries believe that they do not have the resources (physical, financial, spiritual, mental, emotional, cultural, or relational) necessary to do what their job demands, they will feel stress. This stress can lead to a lack of well-being, burnout, or attrition (Hay et al. 2007).

Stress may also be viewed from a perspective of good stress (*eustress*) and bad stress (*distress*), depending on the effect that it has on the individual (Le Fevre, Matheny, and Kolt 2003). When a person experiences little external motivation to achieve work-related goals, the person may put forth little effort to achieve them. However, if the person learns that the boss is watching, the person might feel a bit more stress and increase his or her effort to achieve the goals. This form of accountability is generally considered positive and can be considered eustress. However, a greater threat (such as being fired the next time a small mistake is made) may create too much stress, or *distress*; rather than increasing performance and efficiency, it might lower them. In this sense, technostress can be either eustress or distress depending on one's appraisal of the technology being used (Califf, Sarker, and Sarker 2020). Technology is considered a source of eustress by a missionary when it is appraised positively as helping to accomplish mission-related tasks (e.g., communicating by email rather than by postal systems). Technology can also be appraised negatively, becoming a source of distress, such as might be in the case of the mandatory use of poorly designed accounting software.

## Technology and The Importance of Relationships

From a Christian point of view, it is hard to overstate the importance of good relationships. In the gospels, ethical behavior is characterized by humble service to others (Mark 10:42-45, John 13:1-17) and loving one another (John 13:34-15:17). The

Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) describes primarily social behavior, focusing on both our relationship with God and the relationship with others. Paul's calls to live a Spirit-directed life are primarily commands focused on relationships (e.g., Rom 12-15, Eph 4-6). Humans are so social by nature (Aronson and Aronson 2018) that this may be considered part of what it means to be made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27).

Because relationships are so important from both a human and a divine point of view, we should evaluate technology and our use of technology in terms of its effect on relationships. If technology helps missionaries to better love and serve others, then its use is good; if it does not, then we have simply adopted high-tech resounding gongs and clanging symbols (I Cor. 13:1). Two questions may be asked when evaluating the use of technology to communicate (Weil and Rosen 1997): 1) Does the technology encourage the exchange of accurate information? And 2) Does the technology permit me to connect emotionally with a person?

The accurate exchange of information is essential because Jesus and the gospel are centered on truth (John 14:6). The inaccurate exchange of information can easily occur in computer-mediated communication. Often the messages exchanged are so brief and the time the recipient spends scrolling through them is so short, that the accurate exchange of information does not occur.

Emotional connection (an understanding of how the other is feeling and validation of those feelings) is essential because this is a primary characteristic of a healthy relationship. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15, ESV). "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:32, ESV). "Have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (I Pet 3:8, ESV). In many situations, electronic communication does not permit such emotional connection and should be reconsidered. Whereas face-to-face communication provides many cues concerning the emotional content of a message, including tone of voice, volume, facial expressions, and gestures in addition to the words spoken, sharing of emotion in electronic communication is typically limited to text, emoticons, and gifs, media which are far less nuanced than in-person exchanges (Daft and Lengel 1984; Dunaetz 2019; Dunaetz, Lisk, and Shin 2015). Without the multitude of cues concerning emotional content, electronic communication is far more prone to miscommunication than face-to-face communication.

## Technostress

Technostress is a subject currently researched by many psychologists, computer scientists, and leadership researchers. According to Google Scholar, over 1000 papers were published in 2020 mentioning the subject. When researchers measure technostress, they generally collect information about the feelings people experience when they do not believe they can respond to technology in an appropriate way (Tarafdar et al. 2011). Such feelings vary immensely but include a compulsive need to be connected and online, feeling forced to respond immediately, feelings of being trapped into multitasking, the inability to concentrate on complex problems that would otherwise require analysis and creativity, a loss of work-life balance, and feelings of being continually interrupted. All of these feelings may be experienced by missionaries, depending on their self-expectations and the expectations of others.

Research has generally found five types of technostress that people experience in various situations (Tarafdar et al. 2011; Tarafdar et al. 2020). Some are much more common for missionaries than others.

### Techno-Overload

Techno-overload occurs when one feels the pressure to work faster and accomplish more tasks due to technology. Suppose a missionary starts a YouTube channel and many people each day start posting comments on the videos. To maximize the opportunity to share the gospel, the missionary may feel the need to respond to each comment, although he may never meet any of the people who follow him and correspond with him. Such pressure is an example of techno-overload. Other missionary examples of techno-overload may concern requirements set by the home office of the mission or by supporting churches. These requirements might involve the use of complex accounting and reporting apps or frequent reports of missionary activity to maintain financial support (see Nehrbass and Dunaetz 2018). Even a simple sermon by a pastor of a small church on encouraging missionaries might trigger a dozen emails that may feel overwhelming to a missionary because of the need to respond personally to each one.

### Techno-Invasion

When technology makes us able to be reached anywhere and at any time so that we feel we cannot escape work, techno-invasion occurs. For some people, this blurring of work and personal time can be distressing. A lack of work-life balance (Guest 2002) leads to

exhaustion and burnout. Missionaries who work among resistant people groups (Woodberry 1998) may be especially prone to this. Fruitful acts of ministry may be few and far between, so missionaries may feel the need to be continually available to those whom they serve so as to not miss any opportunities. Such missionaries might feel the need to be accessible 24 hours per day, never separated from their phone or computer.

## Techno-Complexity

When a significant portion of a person's time is spent learning new technology, to such a degree that it reduces (rather than increases) the work that the person accomplishes, techno-complexity is experienced. Typically, a feeling of being intimidated by technology or a lack of mastery of the technology motivates someone to invest an inordinate amount of time in learning how to use it (Tarafdar et al. 2011). However, a desire to avoid work or other stressful situations may also push people towards pouring themselves into mastering complex technological devices and software. This may especially be the case for missionaries. Success in mastering complex forms of technology may be easier to achieve than success in evangelism and church planting; this may motivate the missionary to spend his or her time where success comes relatively easily, even though little may be accomplished which contributes to achieving the missionary's long-term goals.

## Techno-Insecurity

People experience techno-insecurity when they believe that their job or social position is threatened by technology. They may fear losing their job because technology can replace them or because a person more at ease with technology (typically a younger person) could do their job better. Often, people experiencing techno-insecurity become cynical about the technology, refusing to recognize its potential value; this may be an ego-protective measure (Tesser 1988) to help them feel better about themselves. Missionaries may not feel that their job is threatened by new technology, but the thought of leaving their mission and returning to their home country may be threatening because they no longer have the currently required technological skills to enter the job market; this would especially be true of missionaries who had a promising career before going into missions, but it is not unlike what stay-at-home mothers experience when they go back into the workforce.

### Techno-Uncertainty

The stress that comes from the inconvenience associated with bugs, changes, and upgrades in technology is known as techno-uncertainty. One may have to face a software upgrade with no warning or run into a bug at a crucial moment. This may be as simple as a change of interface in a social media, or a system crash that causes a loss of files. The previous knowledge and mastery of the technology may become useless, and more time must be invested into learning how to use it or figuring out how to respond. Missionaries may be especially prone to this type of technostress when they are experiencing other sources of stress; a change of software may be another annoyance that pushes them further into frustration.

### Techno-Comparison

An additional source of technostress, besides the traditionally defined five types (Tarafdar et al. 2007) described above comes from comparing oneself to other users of a technology, *techno-comparison*. When users, typically of social media, compare their lives with those of others who post on the platform, they may become discouraged due to the successes and idealistic lifestyles portrayed in what they view compared to their own lives. When we compare ourselves to people who appear to be superior to us, we often feel discouraged and our self-esteem goes down (Collins 1996). Such social comparison appears to be the prime driver of the increase in depression that has been observed in Generation Z (Heffer et al. 2019; Twenge 2014, 2017). Missionaries might compare themselves to other missionaries who portray themselves as more successful or they may compare themselves to friends and family in their home country who quite likely have a higher material standard of living. Such comparisons are likely to have a negative effect and trigger various self-protective mechanisms such as avoiding others or devaluing what others have or do (Tesser 1988; Hogg 2006).

## Susceptibility to Technostress

Certain organizational conditions, personal characteristics, and demographics make some individuals more susceptible to technostress than others. By recognizing these conditions and characteristics, missionaries may be better equipped to reduce or prevent technostress from occurring in their specific situation, for both themselves and those for whom they are responsible.

## Organizational Conditions Leading to Technostress

Several aspects of a mission organization's culture can contribute to technostress. Organizations, or specific leaders, which expect missionaries to respond immediately to emails or texts will have missionaries with higher levels of technostress than those who are more flexible (Ayyagari, Grover, and Purvis 2011). The need to respond immediately to electronic communication creates work-home conflict, work overload, and feelings of being violated. It also creates *role ambiguity* when the missionaries do not know what their proper role is at the moment. Should they be responsible missionaries and continue what they were doing and what they had planned to do? Or should they be responsive missionaries and change priorities by replying quickly to the electronic communication?

Similarly, people feel higher levels of technostress in centralized, hierarchical organizations rather than in flatter organizations where people have more freedom to decide what to do (Wang, Shu, and Tu 2008). Many missionaries assume that they, as professionals with little direct supervision, are working in organizations that trust them to make the best decisions in a given context. However, there is a tendency, especially among older missionaries, to view missionary work as very hierarchical. Thomas Hale (1995) argues that for missionaries to be team players, "that the team members submit to their leader, regardless of his qualities" (219) and that the purpose of authority is to "mediate God's will in the Christian community" (231) so "if one has a problem submitting to authority, his problem is basically with God" (231). This view of organizational structure may not only promote technostress if the leaders require immediate responses, but this view also sets the stage for conflicts that are expected to be resolved through submission (in contrast to cooperation), an approach to conflict management that makes missionary attrition more likely (Dunaetz 2016; Dunaetz and Greenham 2018).

## Personal Characteristics and Susceptibility to Technostress

Studies have found several characteristics of individuals that appear to make them more or less prone to technostress.

### Sex

In work contexts, men tend to have higher levels of technostress than women (Tarafdar et al. 2011). Although men are more willing to try new technologies than women (who tend to try new technologies only when there is a felt need), they get more frustrated

and experience more discomfort due to technology. In contrast, computer confidence is a good predictor of lower technostress (Tarafdar et al. 2011). Those who believe they are competent in the use of computer technology typically experience less technostress than those who believe they are less competent.

*Age*

Older people tend to experience less technostress than younger people (Tarafdar et al. 2011). While this seems counter-intuitive because many older people struggle with learning new technology, they most likely experience less technostress because they handle stressful situations better than younger people (Aldwin 1991). In addition to being able to put stressful situations into perspective because of their maturity, they tend to have more power in organizations, have more control over what technologies they choose to use, and are better able to judge how important it is to learn a technology.

*Smartphone Compulsiveness*

One of the best predictors of technostress is smartphone compulsiveness (Lee et al. 2014). Smartphone compulsiveness is characterized by the continual use of the smartphone and a feeling that one does not have personal control over one's use of the smartphone. Not only may a smartphone be used to exchange information, but also for the relief of boredom and entertainment. People who are high in smartphone compulsiveness tend to have an external locus of control (i.e., a belief that their behaviors are primarily influenced by forces exterior themselves; Hiroto 1974) in contrast to an interior locus of control (a belief that they themselves are primarily responsible for their behavior). They also tend to be high in materialism (placing a high value on material things) and high in social interaction anxiety. Interestingly, they also tend to be high in the need for touch (the need to receive sensory information through the haptic system; Peck and Childers 2003), for example, the need to touch something before buying it in the supermarket. The compulsive use of the cellphone (for texting or social media) seems to be due to the immediate feedback that it provides. This creates a sort of addiction that interferes in other areas of one's life, which in turn increases one's level of stress.

*Social Media Use*

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media seem to be a unique source of technostress (Tarafdar et al. 2020). Social media sites like Facebook have an extremely

rich variety of content. The user may exchange messages with other users, post pictures or announcements, respond to others' posts, play games, look at photos, search for people from one's past, read others' newsfeeds, watch and read news from other sources, participate in affinity groups, or watch interesting videos (e.g., pets acting like humans). People have a natural tendency to prioritize clicking on that which makes them angry or afraid. The anger and fear thus created raise the level of stress that one feels. When one is sufficiently distressed, the need for some sort of diversion is felt. Rather than leave the social media site (for example, by leaving the computer or by putting the phone down), people often find it easier to distract themselves on the social media site itself (e.g., stop reading about their political outgroup and start watching cute cat videos). This creates an addictive cycle alternating between stress and diversion that can occupy a major portion of an individual's time. Unlike other sources of technostress which cause people to want to avoid the technology, social media sites create an addiction and dependence which causes the user to seek it out.

## Consequences of Technostress

Although technostress is rarely at the forefront of a missionary's life, research has demonstrated that it has several important negative consequences of which we should be aware (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008; Tarafdar, Pullins, and Ragu-Nathan 2015; Tarafdar et al. 2007; Tarafdar et al. 2011). The first consequence, and perhaps the most acutely felt, is *role overload*, the feeling that one has too much to do and not enough time to do it (Coverman 1989). In addition to mastering a new language and culture, ministering to the needs of people around them, and changing the world for Christ, missionaries may feel they have to respond to a never-ending stream of texts and emails, as well as maintain several social media sites. This can lead to burnout and missionary attrition.

Techno-stress also contributes to role conflict, the feelings that one has when facing contradictory expectations and requirements (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). Missionaries may feel *role conflict* when they sense different expectations from various stakeholders. Supporters may expect frequent communication with them; field leadership may expect a commitment to maintaining the existing programs and ministries; local Christians may have expectations for pastoral care; missionaries may have self-expectations for effective ministry to the least reached. It may not be possible to accomplish all these things, a problem compounded by continual electronic communication with the various stakeholders.

In terms of the missionary's future ministry, technostress contributes to both lower organizational commitment, higher turnover intentions, and lower job satisfaction (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008). Because of the discomfort associated with continual stress, the feelings towards one's organizational context become less positive and the frequency of leaving the field may increase. Technostress has also been shown to decrease innovation: techno-overload causes a person to have less time and energy for deep-processing of ideas or generating new ones, while techno-complexity prevents mastery of complex technology which could otherwise be used to innovate (Tarafdar et al. 2011).

Although the goal of using technology is typically to increase productivity and efficiency, it can sometimes lead to a decrease (Tarafdar, Tu, and Ragu-Nathan 2010). When techno-complexity is high, a missionary may spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out how to use the technology, leaving less time for ministry. Techno-uncertainty may consume much of the missionary's time as he or she learns to use updates or troubleshoot the various problems that occur with the technology. Techno-overload may cause a missionary to waste time going through large amounts of irrelevant information, perhaps becoming distracted and losing time going down various rabbit holes that grab his or her attention.

## Strategies for Reducing Technostress

There are several strategies that missionaries and mission leaders can use for reducing technostress (Tarafdar, Tu, and Ragu-Nathan 2010; Tarafdar et al. 2011; Weil and Rosen 1997).

### Individual Strategies

At the individual level, limiting one's use of social media might be the change that can reap the greatest rewards. The addictive nature of social media means that we often pull away from it only after we realize how much time we have wasted. A useful experiment is to leave social media for a week to discover how much one loses and gains. It is possible that little true ministry occurs by collecting likes, giving likes, or staying up to date on friends' pets or political views.

It may also help missionaries to personally evaluate how well different technologies contribute to the value of their communication with others. The value of the communication depends on the accuracy of the information transmitted and the

emotional connection that occurs. Emotional connection enables a relationship to develop by increasing the level of trust and enabling one to better respond to the other person's needs. If some technologies do not contribute to sharing information accurately, developing trust, or enabling a better response to others' needs, a missionary may consider removing them from his or her life.

One way to analyze the appropriateness of a media for communication is through its richness (Daft and Lengel 1984). Media richness is the number of cues that are transmitted in an act of communication. In general, the richer the media, the more likely it is that information will be communicated accurately and that people will connect emotionally. Face-to-face communication is the richest. Texting and email would be far lower in media richness, and phone calls and video conferences would be somewhere in-between. Publicly communicating via social media might be the lowest of all given the ease of miscommunication. The value of a specific technology will depend on the individual and the context. People who are extraverted, people who are agreeable, and males tend to have a greater preference for communicating with rich media than do people who are introverted, people who are less agreeable, and females (Dunaetz, Lisk, and Shin 2015). Extraversion and agreeableness motivate people to prefer rich media because of the pleasure and satisfaction that they receive from more direct communication. Males have a higher preference for rich communication apparently because they are less gifted than females in understanding the nuances communicated through less rich means of communication such as texting.

## Organizational Strategies

On an organizational level, mission organizations need to ensure that missionaries are adequately trained to use the software required by the organization. This includes adequate documentation and technical support which is responsive and easily reached. The training needs to clearly communicate the advantages of using the new technology so that the missionary is motivated to use it. An accurate description of the changes in a missionary's work that will be needed will make the arguments more convincing. Demonstrating the rewards of using a new technology before it is mandatory will make missionaries want to adopt it.

An organizational culture that encourages innovation and allows for failure will tend to lower technostress (Tarafdar, Tu, and Ragu-Nathan 2010). This will encourage missionaries to explore different technologies without being pressured to adopt the technologies which do not lead to greater efficiencies. Similarly, encouraging missionaries to provide support and information sharing with each other concerning

ministry-related technology can lower technostress. People can feel support by receiving the information they need to overcome the technology-related problems they are experiencing and by evaluating in small groups what is important for ministry. For example, a discussion on the use of technology can be added regularly to the agenda of missionary team or field meetings.

In a sense, the essence of missionary work is communication. The Great Commission is essentially a charge to communicate the gospel to others and explain all that it entails in one's life. Modern electronics may either help or hinder this communication. In order to avoid unnecessary and destructive technostress, missionaries and mission leaders need to act wisely to ensure the well-being of a community of people who are giving their all for the furtherance of the gospel.

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**REVIEWED BY STEPHEN STALLARD**
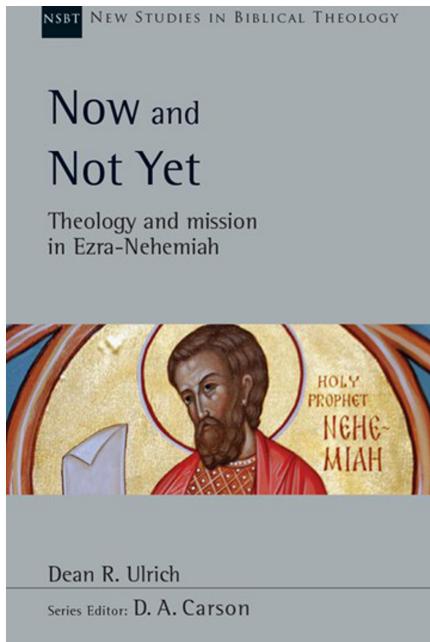
Dean Ulrich (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) has been a PCA pastor and a professor serving at Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry, China Reformed Theological Seminary, and Belhaven University.

Ulrich believes that the eschatological tension of the post-Exilic era advances the redemptive narrative of Scripture and contributes to our continued missional self-understanding. For the author, this tension lies at the heart of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Ulrich narrates the story of Ezra-Nehemiah in a concise fashion, as is typical for volumes in the *New Studies in Biblical Theology* series. After a helpful introduction on biblical theology (and its relation to Ezra-Nehemiah), he explores this Old Testament book with a redemptive-historical approach. Each chapter functions as a cursory commentary on the relevant sections of the text. Ulrich does not get bogged down in textual details and eschews a verse-by-verse approach. Instead, he moves rapidly through the text, pointing out how the narrative is situated within the flow of redemptive history. He also includes practical applications that were frequently encouraging.

There are two primary strengths of this volume. First, the sections of application were interspersed throughout each chapter, providing notes of encouragement to contemporary readers. These exhortations were usually directed at those who are engaged in the hard work of ministry.

Second, Ulrich's work shines as he focuses on the eschatological tension inherent within Ezra-Nehemiah. Ulrich notes that the post-Exilic era was challenging for faithful Israelites, as they struggled to honor the covenant while living in new circumstances. He emphasizes that the Jewish remnant embraced the motif of the second exodus (predicted by Jeremiah) and hoped for the eschatological blessings of the Kingdom. Yet reality in Israel was not what they had expected. Ulrich notes, "Those who lived in Ezra-Nehemiah's Jerusalem might have sampled a preview of the city of God (the 'now'), but fell short of the eventual perfection of the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem (the 'not yet')" (160). For Ulrich, this tension is at the heart of this Hebrew book and is relevant to our contemporary mission as the New Covenant people of God.

The chief weakness of the book is its lack of engagement with urban missiology. A text that chronicles how God's people moved into the city to bring renewal (spiritually and societally) seems ripe for urban missiological reflection. It was somewhat surprising that, in a book about mission in Ezra-Nehemiah, the urban dimension was neglected.

Overall, this volume by Dean Ulrich is a significant contribution to the *New Studies in Biblical Theology* series. *Now and Now Yet* offers a fresh, missional lens through which to read this ancient Hebrew text. Scholars, pastors, and students of the Old Testament will benefit from this textual engagement. Those who read this slender volume will be challenged to reevaluate Ezra-Nehemiah and to consider what its eschatological tension might mean for our contemporary mission.

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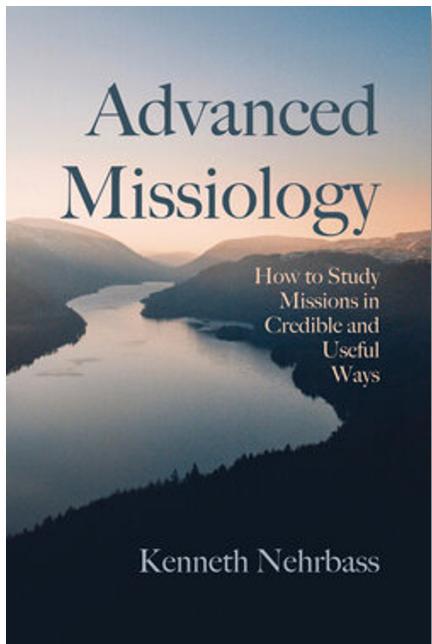
This comprehensive volume by Kenneth Nehrbass (with contributions by Julie Martinez, Rebeca de la Torre Burnett, and Leanne Dzubinski) on the contemporary situation of missiology divides into two sections. Part I uses the metaphor of missiology as a series of tributaries (theoretical disciplines) that form a river, which connects theory into the practice by converging at the common goal of making disciples of Jesus in cross-cultural settings. For instance, the river has tributaries such as theology, history, anthropology, intercultural studies, community development, and education. Part II maintains the river metaphor and deals with the distributaries of missiology such as defining cross-cultural discipleship, seminal theories and models of cross-cultural discipleship, and the future of missiology.

The book states its purpose up front: "to help you [the reader] integrate academic fields in order to increase your understanding of how Christianity spreads across cultures" (1). As a scholar practitioner, Nehrbass' ten years with his family completing a translation of the New Testament in the language of Southwest Tanna in Vanuatu with Wycliffe Bible Translators surely shapes his passion for the nations to know Christ as Savior. Nehrbass is a clear and concise writer offering fresh perspectives on what are the prime movers, shakers, models, and issues that have globally shaped our evangelical northern-American missiological understanding of cross-cultural discipleship together with how to apply educational and community development strategies that make an

impact for Christ and his kingdom. He wants the reader to know how Christianity spreads across cultures by appropriate biblical and cultural exegesis with the "conviction that a paramount goal of any academic study is to make disciples across cultures" (1).

"What we have found lacking," claims the author, "is a book that shows how missiologists have actually generated academically credible theories that are useful for those missionary-practitioners who are making disciples across cultures" (2). Hence, the volume challenges many sacred views of yesteryear concerning the Great Commission. Missiology is not a static three-legged stool composed of theology, social sciences, and history but better viewed as the metaphor of a dynamic river; and needs a new definition since there is a discontinuity between theory and practice. Missiology is the "the utilization of multiple academic disciplines to develop strategies for making disciples across cultures" (chap 1, 14).

We all know the David J. Bosch, Wilbert R. Shenk, Charles E. Van Engen, and Johannes Verkuyl argument of the mission tapestry that runs through the entire Bible. Not completely so, argues the author, as he offers an alternate missiological theology approach (chap 2). Biographical mission history likewise comes under the microscope as a missiological historiography unfolds that uses six theses of analysis to examine mission history and the shifts in the roles of global mission (chap 3). Nehrbass critiques anthropologists of mission as to how they use their studies to advance the gospel in chapter 4. The next chapter (5) examines the usefulness of intercultural studies for making disciples across cultures. Chapter 6 aims at aiding readers to apply community development strategies that work in social transformation and the role that churches play as globalization influences in societies, nations, and cultures. And yet another tributary to the river is the contribution of formal and non-formal education to missionary strategy (chapter 7).

At the beginning of part II, having defined cross-cultural discipleship as "any activity that helps people across cultures to bring these spheres of their lives under the Lordship of Christ" (chapter 8, 202), Nehrbass reviews models and theories of tested field missiology (chapter 9) before he dips a large bucket in the river and distributes a broad splash of missional activities that contribute to God's mission (chapter 10). The last chapter ventures into the future with a panoramic sunrise over the river that propels the reader towards global trends of mission to keep the discipline relevant. By provoking and prodding at the question of how missiology is to advance through the twenty-first century, Nehrbass helpfully explains the tail life and expiration date of missiological ideas. For instance, the table of missiological ideas that have staying

power is a striking reflection (295), even though it is missing the contribution of renown Catholic missiologists that have influenced evangelical thinking such as Stephen B. Bevans, Angelyn Dries, Anthony Gittens, Madge Karecki, Louis J. Luzbetak, Mary Motte, Francis Anekwe Oborji, James Chukwuma Okoye, Robert J. Schreiter, and Roger P. Schroeder. Nehrbass contends that missiology must be more interdisciplinary if it is to address the increasing intricacies of our century's missional contexts.

In addition, I would claim that missiology must also be more ecumenical and non-Western to address these twenty-first century complexities. The book understandably focuses on northern-American evangelicalism with respect to influencers and publications, and even then the volume nearly reaches the 400-page mark. Therefore, my last few thoughts are not so much criticisms but possibilities of awareness towards the unravelling history of our new millennium. First a reminder that the Holy Spirit (the Lord of the church on earth) empowers the currents that move the tributaries and distributaries towards the river of missiology, as well as the river itself. Missiology is the work of the Spirit of Jesus and the direction and volume of flow of God's mission are with the Lord's authority alone. And in that manner, the Spirit is emboldening more streams of women (e.g., the book's contributors) and majority-world scholars to flow with interdisciplinary input into the mainstream. Furthermore, there is an increase in acceptance and volume of inter-Christian dialogue with Catholics and Orthodox practitioner-scholars who will only enhance our understanding of missiology as our streams merge together. Also, how can we neglect in our missional river the ever-increasing stream of the majority-world Pentecostal movement if only by sheer volume alone (10,000 Pentecostals in 1910 moving to 270 million today).

Nehrbass and contributors deserve sincere congratulations on a project that stirs the missiological waters causing eddies, whirlpools, and rip tides all orchestrated to dislodge the flotsam and jetsam of missiological theories and models found wanting that hinder the flow of the Spirit in the mission of God to cross-culturally fulfill the Great Commission in our contemporary world.

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