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Evangelical
Missiological
Society

Journal

Vol 3:1 2023

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The Jesus of "He Gets Us": Sorting Our Christology

Vol 3:1 2023

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Introduction

In a 1927 interview with the *Harvard Crimson*, John Holmes recounts a conversation with Mohandas Gandhi. Known both as a political and religious advocate for the marginalized and dispossessed, among other things, Holmes reported his often-quoted words, "I like your Christ, but not your Christianity." In context, Gandhi continued:

> I believe in the teachings of Christ, but you on the other side of the world do not. I read the Bible faithfully and see little in Christendom that those who profess faith pretend to see. The Christians above all others are seeking after wealth. Their aim is to be rich at the expense of their neighbors. They come among aliens to exploit them for their own good and cheat them to do so. Their prosperity is far more essential to them than the life, liberty, and happiness of others. The Christians are the most warlike people (Harvard Crimson 1927).

While Gandhi no doubt correctly portrayed Christianity in all its colonial darkness, he ultimately rejected Jesus Christ as presented in the pages of the New Testament. Instead, he opted for a Jesus who understood him as he wanted to be understood. His Jesus was a Jesus of convenience, even one of opportunity. For Gandhi, Jesus was a non-violent resistor of evil and a model for all of humanity who were equally children of God, just like Jesus was simply another son of God. In essence, Gandhi formed a Jesus who was a remarkable political and religious advocate for the marginalized and disenfranchised.

Gandhi's portrait of Jesus is not unfamiliar to missiologists articulating proper methods for contextualizing the Savior of the world in contemporary cultures.

Numerous examples such as Robert de Nobili's divine guru, the "Missionary Christology" exported from the West, Canaan Banana's guerilla Christology, even the divergent Christologies of the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, demonstrate how efforts to make Jesus relevant often betray the New Testament portrait of "the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb 1:3). Even Jesus himself did not mince words, "whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). So, the manner in which we relate Jesus to contemporary culture matters. An inaccurate presentation of him will likely lead to a Jesus created in our likeness and, in effect, a following devoted to a graven image formed in the minds of well-intentioned people.

A recent example of a contemporary attempt to contextualize Jesus in the United States is the multi-million-dollar advertising campaign of "He Gets Us." Expected to compete with the marketing budgets of brands such as Chick-fil-a and Mercedes, "He Gets Us" is a limited liability corporation formed in the state of Missouri with its principle office in Overland Park, Kansas. The business is managed by the Servant Foundation, "a global Christian grant-making educational foundation" whose end of fiscal year 2019 fund balance was $699,516,453.

This article will examine the Jesus presented on the "He Gets Us" website, a part of the hugely popular marketing campaign designed to "raise the respect and relevance of Jesus" and "call on Christians to best reflect Jesus' love in their interactions with others." Before this examination, we will briefly survey the Jesus of Gandhi by observing how he made Jesus relevant to his situation and even raised his Jesus to a level of respect on a global scale. Such awareness of Jesus even attracted the attention of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote to Gandhi in 1934, "The healing power for all human distress and need, namely Christ's message, is disappointing more and more [western] thinking people on account of its present organization [the church]" (in Green, 2021:119).

Then, we will focus attention on the New Testament letter of Hebrews and the Jesus who truly "gets us" in the fulness of his divinity and humanity (Heb 4:15). To tell his story, we will argue, is to remain faithful to Jesus' own self-description as we will see in the Gospel of John. Finally, we must consider the consequences of a respected and relevant Jesus that is reinforced by what the majority of culture already believes about him, namely that he is a created being and great teacher but not God (Earls 2022b).

The Jesus of Gandhi

There is little doubt that the most famous non-Christian follower of Jesus was the Indian statesman and non-violent civil protester, Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948). On two separate occasions, one of the lead marketers for "He Gets Us" spoke of Gandhi's oft-quoted quip, "I like your Christ, but not your Christianity." For the marketer, Gandhi represented the sentiment for many in contemporary culture. While there is little doubt that the marketer's intuitive sense is correct—people in US culture like Jesus, but not his church—understanding Gandhi's frame of reference is important.

Raised in a devout family—particularly his mother—Gandhi worshipped Vishnu, the Hindu god who incarnates as Krishna. He grew up in an environment that valued worshipping many other gods and goddesses while also valuing other expressions of faith. His mother belonged to a small *bhakti* movement on the west coast of India focused on openness toward all religious traditions. For her and her teacher Swami Prannath, all faiths led to the divine (Schouten 2008). Characteristic of *Pranami sampradaya*, the *bhakti* movement led by Prannath, was this frequently referenced statement, "They all gave different names to God and all adopted different rituals. But everything consists of Soul and Universe 'Allah' and 'Brahman' are one" (Khulasa 12:38 in Schouten 2008). As Harold Netland writes,

> Gandhi embraced a pluralistic perspective on the religions, and it is often assumed that this pluralism is simply the product of his Hindu worldview . . . [H]owever, although Gandhi always claimed to be a Hindu, his views are eclectic and reflect many influences apart from ancient Hindu teaching (2015:116).

Comparably noted by one biographer, Gandhi believed that "Religions must therefore esteem one another" (Schouten 2008:147). Gandhi himself remarked, "Just as a tree has many branches but one root, similarly the various religions are the leaves and branches of the same tree" (1946:31). This so-called *sarvadharam samanatva* was a synthesis of all religious teachings held equally and harmoniously as expressions of true religion. Schouten records,

> Even though the Mahatma radically rejected conversion, he rejoiced when people were affected by aspects of another religion and wanted to adopt

> them into their own religious experience. He himself integrated many elements—from Christianity in particular—into his own religion (Schouten 2008:154).

It is no secret that Gandhi liked the Christ of Christianity, but did not appreciate his followers very well, namely British colonialists and white South Africans. In fact, Gandhi held that their example of colonial aggression resulting in wars and pestilence, as well as unfettered materialism and cultural exploitation, was testimony that they did not understand Jesus appropriately. Indeed, the influence of the Sermon on the Mount and the cross of Christ on Gandhi's understanding of Jesus only confirmed that institutional Christianity was out of touch with the "Prince of *satyagrahis*," that is, the Prince of non-violent resistance (Netland 2015: 123).

In a short essay about "What Jesus Means to Me" written in 1941, Gandhi sketches his understanding of Jesus:

> What, then, does Jesus mean to me? To me He was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had. To His believers He was God's only begotten Son. Could the fact that I do or do not accept this belief make Jesus have any more or less influence in my life? Is all the grandeur of His teaching and of His doctrine to be forbidden to me? I cannot believe so.

Undeniably, what became popular in Gandhi's line of thinking was the notion that Jesus is for everyone, not simply for the Christian. Gandhi continues, "I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity, but to the entire world; to all races and people, it matters little under what flag, name or doctrine they may work, profess a faith, or worship a god inherited from their ancestors" (1941). For Gandhi, Jesus is the "spark of the divine" and an example of what humanity might achieve if they were to truly follow his teaching. Writing to his friend Milton Newberry Frantz in 1926, Gandhi is clear about his belief in Jesus,

> I am afraid it is not possible for me to subscribe to the creed you have sent me. The subscriber is made to believe that the highest manifestation of the unseen reality was Jesus Christ. In spite of all my efforts, I have not been able to feel the truth of that statement. I have not been able to move beyond the belief that Jesus was one of the great teachers of mankind (XXXV:23).

Bonhoeffer and Gandhi

A contemporary and admirer of Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer hoped to find in a visit to India what he did not find in a one-year stint in the United States. Clifford Green notes that while studying at Union Theological Seminary in 1930-31, Bonhoeffer was in search of a new *modus vivendi* for the church which he hoped to discover in America. Instead, he discovered a theologically impotent church and was "bitterly disappointed" by his visit (2021:118). Writing to Gandhi while he pastored in London from 1933-1935, Bonhoeffer reflects his hope, "I feel we western Christians should try to learn from you, what realisation of faith means, what a life devoted to political and racial peace can attain" (Green 2021:119).

Bonhoeffer appreciated Gandhi's non-violent activism along with his application of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, especially in regards to living in community which was the focus of Bonhoeffer's first dissertation as well as his later pioneering seminary effort at Finkenwalde. In his letter, Bonhoeffer acknowledged, "I know, of course, you are not a baptized Christian, but the people whose faith Jesus praised mostly did not belong to the official Church at that time either" (in Green 2020:119). Whether or not this was his motivation to send Gandhi an article he had written entitled, "Concerning the Christian Idea of God" (1932:177-185) we do not know. However, Bonhoeffer is absolutely clear that the only way that we can know God is because of his own self-revelation in Jesus Christ. He writes, "God entered history in Jesus, and so entirely that he can be recognized in his hiddenness only by faith. God gives an amazing proof of his sole authority in the cross of Christ" (1932:184).

In spite of his admiration for Gandhi, there was a well-defined divergence in their understanding of Jesus. Bonhoeffer's Christology was clear. In his prophetic voice, he noted the importance of a proper view of Jesus for his day:

> Whether or not we want to see it, whether or not we think it is right, the churches are caught up in a struggle for their faith such as we have not seen for hundreds of years. This is a struggle—whether or not we agree—over our confession of Jesus Christ alone as Lord and Redeemer of this world (Bonhoeffer, 2007:376).

Gandhi, on the other hand, believed that Jesus was simply a human example of our ability to become divinely animated. The manifestation of such animation revealed itself in the application of the Sermon of the Mount as well as in other religious expressions which taught the possibility for the Kingdom of God to manifest on earth. So, it is true. Gandhi liked Jesus as created in Gandhi's image of non-violent resistance to the oppression of humanity. He recognized Christians did not always model this characteristic of Jesus. Understandably, he did not like institutional Christianity. Neither was he a fan of missionaries as they sought to convert people away from their traditional religions.

Unlike Bonhoeffer, Gandhi's Jesus was not offensive. He was not a stumbling block. He was a Jesus who was respected and relevant for Gandhi's cultural context and for millions of others who might be offended by the Jesus of the New Testament. This seems to be what Darrell Whiteman described as "bad contextualization":

> Another function of contextualization in mission is to offend-but only for the right reasons, not the wrong ones. Good contextualization offends people for the right reasons. Bad contextualization, or the lack of it altogether, offends them for the wrong reasons (Whiteman, 1997:3).

The classic missiological mistake of over-contextualizing Jesus is what we observe in the Jesus of Gandhi and seems to be the trajectory, as we will see, of "He Gets Us." While we must remove the offenses that keep people from coming to Jesus, even if that means the church, we must not clear away the stumbling block of Jesus himself. He must be confronted for who he is. Even so, out of an admirable motivation to distinguish Jesus from his followers, "He Gets Us" presents Jesus in likeable and relatable scenarios connected to the felt needs of its marketing sample.

The Jesus of "He Gets Us"[1]

Touted as the largest media outreach campaign in the history of Christianity, the wildly successful "He Gets Us" has raised more than a half a billion dollars for marketing Jesus to skeptical audiences in the United States. With an expectation of future marketing dollars heading north of a billion, the goal is to impact the manner in which culture

[1] Information regarding "He Gets Us" is pulled from multiple sources including and interviews with campaign marketers from Haven | A Creative Hub and Lerma. Due to the social media nature of the campaign, the website frequently changes.

thinks about Jesus. Additionally, the goal is not to convert the skeptic. Rather, it is to tell a valuable story of Jesus in a winsome manner even if one would never arrive at the conclusion that he is a prophet or God. According to the campaign, "Jesus was not exclusive. He was radically inclusive."

Background

Backed by market research indicating that people still like the idea of Jesus, "He Gets Us" presents him to audiences who are often on the margins of faith and unwelcomed by Christians. The campaign emphasizes the radical love Jesus expresses towards those exact types of people in the pages of the New Testament gospels. Most certainly, the campaign is challenging us to answer the question, *How did the world's greatest love story become known as a hate group?* Outlining fifteen touchpoints with culture such as anger, anxiety, etc. the marketers behind the campaign want people to connect to the stories about Jesus without having the trappings of his divinity. As one marketer stated, "Our goal is to open the door. Provide an on-ramp for people who want to explore Jesus."

After six months of market research at an estimated cost of over one million dollars, the campaign determined four key communication points:

1. Highlight Jesus' relatable life and non-judgmental love;
2. Create a fresh and compelling understanding of Jesus' love, compassion, and forgiveness without condition or prerequisite;
3. Change misconceptions our culture has about Jesus, often related to hurt or bitterness of his followers' actions or inactions;
4. Remind our culture that Jesus is not defined by human frailties or failures, but by his sacrifice, response, and grace.

With concise and clever advertising, "He Gets Us" lets people in Las Vegas know that "Jesus went all in" while at Pittsburgh Pirates baseball games, it wants people to know that "Jesus still believes with two outs in the 9th." Certainly, with no ill intent, in St. Louis, Cardinals' fans read "Jesus forgave errors." The simple and relatable phrases are a part of the brilliance of the campaign. The beautiful videography, photography, and

storylines of the "He Gets Us" televised commercials are impactful and eye-catching, causing people to genuinely think that Jesus really does get us. Now with more than 300 million YouTube views, the most relatable videos highlight how Jesus connects with those experiencing anxiety, loneliness, and thirteen other ostensible social challenges.

In a manner reminiscent of Gandhi, the campaign communicated: "What if we told you that Christians don't own Jesus. He's for everybody." According to qualitative data from the marketing study, people responded positively to the idea that they did not need to be a Christian. All one simply needed to do was to follow Jesus and his ways. Nevertheless, the campaign is not without its critics (Capstone Report 2022; Crain 2022; Chelva 2022; Porter 2022). One need only go to its Facebook page and see the numerous and varied reactions to its advertising. Even Christians are among those who criticize the campaign primarily due to its clear lack of reference to Jesus' lordship. In defense of the goals of the campaign, one marketer commented, "They just rush to judgment and they say your ad sucks. And basically because you're ignoring that he is Lord and not just a guy. And it's like, 'Yeah, we know that. But we're the on-ramp. It's people like you that need to set people straight when you become their friend.'"

Jesus in "He Gets Us"

It is admittedly difficult to derive a clear picture of Jesus simply through television commercials, social media posts, or spot advertising at sporting events. And that's the point. "He Gets Us" provides just enough provocative statements about Jesus that it drives people to explore further. With millions of impressions on the Internet and 100,000 visits per day to the website,[2] "He Gets Us" paints a portrait of Jesus as one who has been tempted in every way and therefore connects with what people are going through: anxiety and stress, injustice, judgment, politics, criticism, hostility, mourning, teenage pregnancy, immigration, stress, loneliness, poverty.

According to "He Gets Us," Jesus dealt with attacks of anxiety and worry. In fact, Jesus addressed his anxiety with coping strategies familiar to everyone. In one instance, for example, "He retreated to a favorite quiet place—a garden of old growth olive trees on the side of a mountain." Bringing along friends for emotional support, Jesus spent the night wrestling with his emotions. Yet, "He'd tried to cope with the anxiety as best

[2] The website is in at least its second iteration. The focus has shifted to a first-person voice where the content creators take center stage in their "musings" over how to present a "true and complete picture" of a Jesus who gets us. This article presents data from the website accessed on 1 October 2022.

he knew how, and just like many of us, his coping mechanism proved insufficient." Those coping mechanisms included friends and prayer. In conclusion, "He Gets Us" asserts, "Yet, despite his inability to find solace, Jesus found the strength to face his accusers and submit to them willingly and without violence, knowing that his death would further spread his message of radical love."

Such a portrait of Jesus is affirmed throughout the "He Gets Us" website. His stories reminded the content creators of His humanity, "a man who lived 2,000 years ago." Simply to model ourselves after Jesus when we are trolled or tested appears to be part of the appeal. In the face of a first century AD form of cancel culture, Jesus was not deterred from delivering his radical truth. Likewise, we also can follow Jesus' example and stand up for our truth, whatever that truth might be. Jesus, in the words of the content creators, "set a high bar for himself and for others" even though "it must have not been easy for him to practice what he'd preached."

Overall, "He Gets Us" correctly identifies cultural touchpoints often left undiscussed in the church today. The manner in which these touchpoints are addressed certainly act as on-ramps for further conversations about Jesus. The message of "He Gets Us" is clear. Jesus does get us and all we need to do is emulate his life; a message familiar to that of Gandhi's Jesus. Yet, who actually is this Jesus and does the message of "He Gets Us" properly portray him as he spoke about himself?

Granted, "He Gets Us" admittedly is not presenting Jesus as God or savior and they have been successful.[3] In fact, there are only three explicit references to God and one to savior among the various cultural touchpoints.

1. [Jesus] "pleaded with God to make his problems go away. But this was a petition he knew wasn't going to be answered."
2. The man [Jesus] who prayed to God, "Give us this day our daily bread," experienced hunger.
3. "The pandemic even made many question the existence of a god or ask why an all-loving, all-powerful being would allow this to happen."
4. The Sadducees did not believe in the coming of a savior king.

[3] As of 16 January 2023, the "About Us" page included the following two additions: 1) "Jesus is the son of God, who came to Earth, died, and was resurrected, then returned to heaven and is alive today;" 2) "Though we believe he was what Christians call fully God and fully man, that may not be what you believe. We're simply inviting you to explore with us at He Gets Us how might things be different if more people followed his example."

Even so, we are left to our imagination regarding Jesus' relationship to God. If anything, Jesus does not appear to be reliant on anyone except his own inspired message of radically inclusive love. So, the message frequently communicated by "He Gets Us" appears as a Pelagian one (Rees 1988); namely, a message that Jesus is an example and if we simply follow his model of radical love our lives can also be sorted out like his.

In marketing, as we were reminded by one of the "He Gets Us" promoters, "frequency wins." The more often a message about a product is communicated, that is the message retained by the consumer. The ubiquitous presence of "He Gets Us" on television commercials, sporting events, social media, even in Times Square, communicates a message about Jesus. "He Gets Us" paints a portrait of a Jesus who preached a radical message of inclusive love. Indeed, "Jesus set a pretty good example of peace and love" as a promoter iterated. Yet, a reductionistic view of Jesus as simply a model for one to emulate leaves his portrait lacking the full pallet of his self-description. Indeed, the frequency of his own self-identification as we see in the Gospel of John as well as the manner in which others identified him in the synoptic accounts makes us wonder if "He Gets Us" is answering the wrong question. For example, in Matthew 16:13-17 (NIV)[4] Jesus himself asks two very important identity questions:

> When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"*
>
> They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."
>
> "But what about you?" he asked. *"Who do you say I am?"*
>
> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
>
> Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (emphasis added).

Who is it, exactly, that "gets us?" In critiquing the Christology of "He Gets Us," might it be helpful to suggest that an incomplete portrait of Jesus is an inaccurate portrait of Jesus, and thus an inaccurate portrait of the God whom he came to reveal?

[4] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

Given Jesus' response to Peter's proclamation that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, there are elements of who Jesus is that simply cannot be left out if any compelling portrait of Jesus is to be accurate. It seems, though, that "He Gets Us" does exactly this. After all, *who Jesus is*, is equally important (if not more so) than *what he is like*. Undeniably, this question of his identity precedes not only the question of what he's like, but even the question of *what he's done for humanity*. Unlike the author of Hebrews, this is another vital element that "He Gets Us" leaves out.

The Jesus of Hebrews and "He Gets Us"

Key to the Christology of Hebrews is the superiority—the preeminence—of Jesus over and above all things. The author, writing to a mixed Jewish-Gentile audience apparently confused about Jesus, begins his treatment with an astounding description of Jesus as the one who has been "appointed heir of all thing," through whom the entire universe was made (1:2). Jesus, he says, "is the radiance of God's glory" and is not merely an image or reflection of God, but "the exact representation of his being," who sustains "all things by his powerful word, and having provided purification for sins, is now enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (1:3) as the actively ruling Christ, the Messiah, the Lord of all.

The writer goes on to explain in detail Jesus' superiority over the Angels (1:5-2:18) and over earthly deliverers like Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13) as well as earthly priests (4:14-7:28). He explains the superiority of Jesus' covenant over the old, Jesus' sacrifice over the Jewish system, and more (Chs.7-13) And it is this Jesus who the author later insists "is the same yesterday and today and forever" (13:8). In light of such a high Christology, it is a markedly lopsided view of Jesus that emphasizes his humanity while making no mention whatsoever of his preeminence, his divinity, his Lordship, the significance of his death on the cross, his resurrection, ascension, or session.

However, in chapter four the writer balances a high Christology with the humanity of Jesus:

> Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our

> weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16).

It is clear that "He Gets Us" aims to present a well-defined truth about Jesus who empathizes with our weaknesses. Yet while the radically inclusive and tolerant Jesus of "He Gets Us" may certainly be compelling to those who might consider him irrelevant to contemporary life, the end of Heb 4:15 cannot be ignored, "but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—*yet he did not sin*" (emphasis added). Bonhoeffer notes, "Jesus' being human embodies therefore a double judgment on human beings—the absolute condemnation of sin and the relative condemnation of human orders" (1943[2015a]:91-92). The reality of human sinfulness—whether their own sin, or the sins of others—as the reason *why* people experience all of these things that even Jesus experienced (or at least "gets"), simply is not addressed by "He Gets Us." And while the reality of Jesus' genuine humanity cannot be forgotten in any true and accurate depiction of who he is, the "relevance" and *significance* of Jesus' humanity goes far beyond his simply "getting us," and being rightly concerned with issues of justice and equality.

In Hebrews as in the rest of the New Testament, Jesus is presented as he is. He is indeed our great high priest, an advocate who intercedes with authority on our behalf, that we might receive mercy and find help in times of existential need (Heb 4:14,16; Rom 8:34; 1 Jn 2:1). While he indeed did come to offer humanity a pattern of the fullness of human life (1 Pet 2:21; 1 Jn 2:6), he is more than just a teacher providing wonderful inspiration with a message of radical inclusion, love, and acceptance. He came to reveal God to humanity (John 1:18; 14:7-11), to provide the perfect atoning, substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of humanity (Heb 10:1-10; 1 John 2:2), to defeat demonic powers (1 John 3:8) and even death itself (2 Tim 1:10). As Bonhoeffer writes, Jesus is "the personal presence of God in the world" (1932:181).

The Stories of Jesus in John

It was suggested above that an incomplete portrait of Jesus, is in the end an inaccurate portrait of Jesus, and thus an inaccurate portrait of the God who he came to reveal. And as we read his words in John 14:8-11, it is clear that he indeed does reveal the Father:

> Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. "Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves (NIV).

Where the book of Hebrews offers something of a systematic Christology, in the gospel of John we find a Christology in narrative form. The prologue of John's gospel (John 1:1-18) undoubtedly delivers the most explicit exposition of his Christology, culminating with verse 14,

> The Word [Gr. Logos – the cosmic, governing principle of all things] became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NIV)

However, in the stories of Christ that John relays, when Jesus is speaking specifically of his own identity, we find the repeated phrase "I am," as in 14:11 above, or upon his arrest in 18:6, ("When Jesus said, 'I am he,' they drew back and fell to the ground"). Such a common phrase is easily overlooked, but when coming from the lips of Jesus, there is a unique significance. The seven so-called "I AM" statements[5] of Jesus occurring throughout John's gospel narrative and are perhaps most compelling in this regard. As Nicholas Perrin states:

> As a set of seven statements (seven being the number of fullness or completion), they promise to provide a comprehensive Christological account. Grasp the meaning of these I AMs, John seems to hint, and you will start to get your head around the very core of who Jesus is, especially as he functions in relation to humanity (2019:120).

[5] These "I AM" statements are: 1. "I am the bread of life." (6:35) 2. "I am the light of the world." (8:12) 3. "I am the gate" (10:7, 9) 4. "I am the good shepherd." (10:11, 14) 5. "I am the resurrection and the life." (11:25) 6. "I am the way and the truth and the life." (14:6) 7. "I am the true vine." (15:1, 5).

Each of Jesus' statements begins with the Greek phrase ego eimi ("I am"), which undoubtedly recalls Exodus 3:14 linking himself to Yahweh's famous self-revelation to Moses: "I AM WHO I AM." Again, Perrin: "In repeating his status as "I AM," John's Jesus identifies himself with Yahweh, the eternal and covenant-keeping God. To be the "I AM"—for Yahweh and Jesus—is to be the great king and the ruler of the kingdom of God" (2019:121).

John states that his purpose in relaying such stories of Jesus is that we, just like Peter in Matthew 16:16-17, might believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in his name (John 20:31). It is by believing in who he is, not merely by appreciating, no matter how profoundly, what he is like—a response the Jesus of "He Gets Us" seems to elicit—that we may have life in his name. As Perrin states, for Jesus to be the "I AM" is to be the great king and ruler of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, over all. It is very good news that it is the Lord himself that gets us. And what response should this news of Jesus elicit from us? The proper response is repentance—that is, a change of allegiance—and a recognition that Jesus is who he says he is. As Matthew Bates writes, "It is a call to salvation and discipleship into the ways of King Jesus" (2021:98).

There is much to say about a life of genuine discipleship to Jesus, and the true hope that comes in following him. Consider Jesus' statement:

> I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:1-8).

Jesus is the vine and his followers, once they are committed to remaining in Him, are the branches (John 15:1-8). There is a mystical, life-giving union that his followers enjoy as a benefit of true change of allegiance. It is not just that "he gets us," but we get him in a very real sense through the indwelling Holy Spirit that he has sent to empower

his people. The Spirit empowers and equips those in Christ to endure and overcome the trials and troubles life brings, and to live a fruitful life. Branches that do not produce fruit, Jesus says, will be cut off, and productive branches will be *pruned* in order to be more fruitful (15:2). Bonhoeffer catches the depth of such discipleship:

> It now becomes understandable that the New Testament calls us again and again to be "like Christ." We are to be like Christ because we have already been shaped into the image of Christ. Only because we bear Christ's image already can Christ be the "example" whom we follow. Only because he himself already lives his true life in us can we "walk just as he walked" (1 John 2:6), "act as he acted" (John 13:15), "love as he loved" (Eph 5:2; John 13:34; 15:12), "forgive as he forgave" (Col 3:13), "have the same mind that was in Jesus Christ" (Phil 2:5), follow the example he left for us (1 Peter 2:21), and lose our lives for the sake of our brothers and sisters, just as he lost his life for our sake (1 John 3:16). Only because he was as we are can we be as he was (1937 [2015b]:272).

To their credit, "He Gets Us" rightly explains that Jesus understands the existential suffering, alienation, abuse, and all of the realities and situations that people experience. But Perrin rightly reminds us that all of these things,

> [H]ave occurred, will occur, and are occurring even now (more than ever in fact) simply because some have chosen to testify to Jesus as King . . . Wherever Jesus is proclaimed as king, trials are the norm. We should not expect a branch to be exempt from the sap of the vine. Jesus never promised that it would be "cool" to be part of the kingdom. In fact, he promised just the opposite: he promised exclusion and resistance. Yet through such things, mysteriously and paradoxically, the people of the kingdom stand to be revitalized as they abide in him (2019:144).

While Jesus is the way of deliverance from trials and troubles, his deliverance often comes by way of endurance, with the knowledge that we are not alone. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the ultimate suffering (Heb 12:2). And for the joy set before us, we can endure the existential threats of this life, knowing that the Good Shepherd has promised us a fearless and painless future, *upon his return*. This indeed is the

Christian hope. In the meantime, we endure, enabled by the Holy Spirit and "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb 12:2 NIV). The cross comes before the crown, but if we endure the cross, the crown does come. Equally true, the crib comes before the cross and Bonhoeffer captures its significance:

> Then the miracle of all miracles takes place. The Son of God becomes a human being. The Word became flesh. The One who had dwelled from all eternity in the Father's glory, the One who was in the form of God, who in the beginning had been the mediator of creation so that the created world can only be known through him and in him, the One who was very God—this One takes on humanity and comes to earth (1937 [2015b]:194).

Conclusion

The manner in which Jesus speaks about himself in John's gospel and what the book of Hebrews reiterates is the reality of *who* it is that "gets us." All of this is wrapped up in Peter's response to Jesus' question in Matt 16:16. While it is true that the watching world will judge Jesus by his followers (John 13:35), and "He Gets Us" is surely seeking to reveal his love and compassion that the church has often failed to reflect, an incomplete portrait of Jesus, nevertheless, is an inaccurate portrait of Jesus, and thus an inaccurate portrait of the God who he came to reveal.

The "He Gets Us" promoters are concerned with "raising the respect and relevancy of Jesus in our culture." Statistics seem to indicate that Americans do respect Jesus in like fashion to Gandhi's famous quip, "I like your Jesus, I don't like your Christianity" (Earls 2022a; see Barna 2015). If this kind of respect is already there, it may be that "He Gets Us" is reinforcing a wrong understanding of Jesus—a Jesus in the image of Gandhi, perhaps. In the midst of their concern with raising the respect and relevancy of Jesus, there is a failure to reflect the *reality* of Jesus. How much more compelling might this whole initiative be if it were understood that when we see this Jesus we see God himself?

In a twelve-year observational study conducted by Lifeway Research and Ligonier, evangelicals consistently demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the New Testament Jesus

(State of Theology 2022; Lifeway Research 2022). When asked to respond to the statement, "Jesus was a great teacher, but not God," 30 percent of evangelicals agreed. Similarly, when asked to respond to the statement, "Jesus was the first created being of God," a surprising 53 percent of evangelicals agreed. There is a Christ in crisis and it is an identity crisis: the fundamental truth of Jesus Christ as God's self-revelation. It is a struggle for the one true faith passed down from the apostles to us today.

The difference between the Jesus of "He Gets Us" and the Jesus of the apostles and his early followers ultimately lies in the response that each portrait elicits from its hearers. Jesus asks Peter – and each of us by extension – "Who do *you* say that I am?" (Matt16:15). Does the portrait of Jesus that "He Gets Us" paints elicit from us a response like Peter's – "you are the Messiah, the son of the living God" – or, rather like Gandhi's, "To me He was one of the greatest teachers humanity has ever had"?

While "He Gets Us" is an on-ramp to more conversations about Jesus, the frequency in which Jesus is portrayed as a human example to follow betrays his two natures as fully God and fully human. People are teased to believe that Jesus gets us without ever being told that for us to get him requires intellectual assent to who he truly is. Instead, the Pelagian message of "He Gets Us" makes one believe that all that is needed is to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps and be more like Jesus. In essence, the Jesus of "He Gets Us" is not offensive. In other words, it is bad contextualization.

Bonhoeffer was correct. It is difficult for people to come to faith, but not because they cannot relate to a Jesus who gets them. Rather, coming to faith requires something more than mere conformity to the human Jesus. He writes,

> We can make it hard for ourselves and others to come to faith. It is hard for those thrust into extreme disgrace, desolation, poverty, and helplessness to believe in God's justice and goodness. It becomes hard for those whose lives have fallen into disorder and a lack of discipline to hear the commandments of God in faith. It is hard for the well-fed and the powerful to comprehend God's judgment and God's grace. It is hard for those who are disappointed by a false faith and who have lost self-control to find the simplicity of surrendering their hearts to Jesus Christ (1943 [2015a]:96).

Gandhi did not find it in himself to surrender his heart to Christ. However, he did find it in himself to like him and to attempt to emulate his life which made him the most famous non-Christian follower of Christ. Was it enough that Gandhi followed Jesus' example? Is it enough for those inspired by "He Gets Us" to do the same? Not if Bonhoeffer's reminder is true: "Thus, Christ becomes not the teacher of mankind, the example of religious and moral life for all time, but the personal revelation, the personal presence of God in the world" (1932:181).

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Lives that Welcome: How a Non-Western Understanding of Hospitality Can Revitalize the American Church's Fellowship and Outreach

Vol 3:1 2023

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There is an epidemic of loneliness in America today (Cigna 2018), and evangelical churches are not immune (Linneman 2018). Even as the world becomes more technologically advanced and interconnected, many feel disconnected from others emotionally and mental health issues among Americans are on the rise (Twenge 2017, 153). Many American churches are acknowledging lack of community as a problem and are seeking to address the problem by starting initiatives like small groups. Though small groups are helpful, they are still often conducted in a programmatic way and are thus not sufficient to address people's deep and daily lack of connection.

Over lunch in my home, some local friends recently lamented the fact that though they attend the small group of their church, they still desire to connect with people personally in unstructured ways in each others' homes. But their repeated invitations to others in the small group to join them for a meal, while not viewed negatively, are seen as somewhat abnormal. The prevailing mentality in the American Church is that if one is involved in a small or community group, one is "doing community." To do more is seen as being akin to doing something like going on a camping trip or to the beach with another family—it is fun to dream about but it is nearly never followed through on or taken seriously.

Church leadership is often very focused on getting people into small groups as a marker of success, and this focus is often picked up by the congregation as well. My family and I visited a church for several weeks a few years ago and were surprised that every single conversation that we had with others in the pews consisted of them asking us if we had attended one of the church's small groups yet. But not once were we invited to someone's home or to get together with another family personally.

Invitations to small groups are not wrong. Indeed, it is a sign of the health of a church if the congregation is enthusiastic about gathering in smaller groups. In this paper, my goal is not at all to discredit the idea of small groups, but to argue that viewing them as the single benchmark of whether a church is connected with one another is unwise and in fact can short-circuit true growth in hospitality. There are several reasons for this, all of which are integrally connected to the effectiveness of missionary efforts both at home and abroad.

Small groups are subject to change (groups become large and split up, groups dwindle when people move away or are prevented from attending by circumstances, hosts sometimes need to stop hosting, and locations shift). Any time that dynamics shift, this has the strong potential to leave small group attenders adrift, because they have banked on a certain time and place to do community in a programmatic way. If they have not also developed the muscles of creating community themselves by giving and receiving hospitality with a variety of people, they will be left in isolation until they can join another small group.

Making small groups programmatic and then focusing exclusively on them as the measure of success for a church community means that we are making hospitality something that is only done by the elite (the hosts), thereby excusing others, since there can only be a finite number of small group hosts. If we broaden churches' focus to include encouraging hospitality of all kinds at all times, then small groups become not an end in themselves but a dynamically catalytic springboard.

Viewing programmatic small groups as the single definition of community essentially vaccinates congregations against being characterized by hospitality, because it leaves people in a passive mode, stunted in their capacity to connect with others and create community themselves in a consistent and holistic way. If the muscle of hospitality is left to atrophy and is only exercised by receiving hospitality on a given night of the week or possibly showing hospitality to the same small group of familiar people, we leave so much on the table in terms of how we could use all of our open homes not only in a church-upbuilding sense but in a mission and outreach sense.

Small groups should certainly be a focus of the church, but they should be viewed for what they actually are: a helpful program that can be a springboard for hospitality and

community beyond a weekly meeting and beyond the bounds of the small group. Lives characterized by hospitality and fellowship should be the goal, and small groups are one expression of that, but not the only expression or even the most important one. Church leaders should encourage their congregations not only to join a small group but to cultivate community in their lives in a variety of ways.

Non-programmatic hospitality is one of the church's greatest tools in effective outreach to nearly every group they are seeking to reach. Cultivating a hospitable openness in our daily lives will provide opportunities to be a gospel presence in our own post-Christian society, among immigrants from around the world who reside in the US, and among the peoples some of us will encounter when serving as overseas missionaries. To neglect the cultivation of this tool in the American Church is to leave American Christians unprepared and ill-equipped for ministry at home and abroad.

Non-Programmatic Hospitality As a Vital Ministry in the Post-Christian West

The average American unbeliever is unlikely to attend a church's small group meeting as their first contact with the Christian community. The structured nature is intimidating to someone on the outside; indeed small groups can be intimidating even to church-going people who are considering joining a new one in a new church. There is a hesitancy because it's uncertain what will be happening. But informal hospitality is not like that. Everyone knows what will happen: talking, eating, getting to know one another, and becoming better friends.

Rosaria Butterfield was converted from a life of atheism through the faithful, persevering informal hospitality of a local pastor and his wife. If they had repeatedly invited her to their church's small group as their first contact with her, it seems unlikely she would have ever come, much less opened her heart to the message of Christ (Olasky 2013). But they instead invited her into their home and into their lives, creating the context for her to find new life herself, including eventually getting involved in their church and the small group that met in their home.

Butterfield is now an author and speaker encouraging other Christians to open their homes, saying: "We forget hospitality isn't a nice add-on you do when you happen to have a spare Saturday afternoon. It's the bridge that God is going to use to solve the biggest problems in people's lives (Carlson 2018). In her book, *The Gospel Comes with A Housekey: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World*, Butterfield employs the term "radically ordinary hospitality" to denote a welcoming openness that is a lifestyle and is not confined to programs or set times. She pulls no punches: "Our lack of Christian hospitality is a violent neglect of [people's] souls" (Butterfield 2018, 71). Conversely, "Practicing radically ordinary hospitality is [our] street credibility with [our] post-Christian neighbors" (Butterfield 2018, 40).

Non-Programmatic Hospitality As a Vital Ministry Among Immigrants

In their excellent resource, *Who Is My Neighbor: Reaching Internationals in North America*, Philip and Kandace Connor write: "Many internationals have never been invited into a local home . . . The cultures of many internationals who come to North America elevate so highly the gift of hospitality, that many are astonished to find North American life so individualized" (2008, 69). In my experience, the most common answer that non-western immigrants give when asked what the hardest thing has been about their move to the USA is social isolation and lack of community. Though exact statistics vary, upwards of seventy percent of international students have never entered an American home (International Students, Inc. 2020). To take the liberty of extrapolating, it seems likely that based upon this statistic, the majority of immigrants, in general, have not been invited into American homes, which is a tragically missed opportunity to demonstrate the welcoming love of God in a tangible way.

Though it may feel uncomfortable to show hospitality to those who are very different, missiologist Scott Hagley reminds believers that

> Love is not the intimacy of a nuclear family safe at home around the fireplace, but rather the response of the family to an uninvited knock at the door . . . The love of God . . . is formed in response to the presence of another. It is not safe but risky. It is not only about intimacy, but also hospitality (2019, 100).

When befriending those from non-western cultures, it is common to come to a point where one's own commitment to relationships, in general, is called into question by way of comparison. Shawn Smucker encountered this when considering writing a book about getting to know a Syrian refugee named Mohammed:

> "I don't know if I want to write this book," I tell [my wife] quietly. "I don't know if I'll even be disappointed if the book doesn't happen."
>
> "Really? Why?"
>
> I pause. "To be honest, I know I'm not a great friend. if I have the choice between hanging out and staying home, you know I choose home almost every time. I don't like it when other people depend on me, because that requires something . . . I'll have to be a good friend to Mohammad, a better friend than I've ever been to anyone else, not only while I'm writing the book but even after I'm finished. That's why I don't know if I should write it. I don't know if I can enter into this kind of commitment."
>
> "Maybe that's why you should write it," she says (2018, 46-47).

Eventually, Smucker decides to write the book, and his work is predicated on the question: "What would my life look like if I made friendship a priority?" (2008, 54).

Friendship does not come naturally to Westerners. We are "known for being friendly" but take a "no-strings approach" (Livermore 2009, 74). In many cultures, however, "a relationship without any strings attached is no relationship" (Livermore 2009, 75). Perhaps we would do well to ask whether there is a correlation between our desire for autonomy and our gnawing loneliness.

When freedom increases, social ties decrease. When social ties increase, freedom decreases. There is no way around this: humans cannot have it all. But perhaps we can learn from immigrant friends that moving towards a middle ground that includes more relationships is a healthier way to live. We can condition ourselves to stop fearing increasing obligations and instead begin viewing them as evidence that our social network is getting stronger.

Non-Programmatic Hospitality As a Vital Ministry in the Majority World

Non-programmatic hospitality is also an essential practice for Americans who plan to move to non-western cultures to engage in missionary work. Too many American missionaries are viewed as cold and overly-driven when they fly in with a tightly-scheduled agenda that does not make room for relationships. Unfortunately, a task-oriented understanding of evangelism and church ministry has often been ingrained in these missionaries in their home churches in America, where non-programmatic hospitality was not given the emphasis it deserved.

As such, western missionaries cannot be blamed for the blindspot many of them have when it comes to the importance of a lifestyle of hospitality, but the fact remains that it will likely have dire consequences for their ministry efforts in a non-western setting (Davis 2015, 76-92). As with many aspects of missionary training, an emphasis on a lifestyle of hospitality is best cultivated when the missionary candidate is still at home, not when they are in the throes of adjusting to a new culture, especially because hospitality is a universal command of Scripture, not simply a cultural feature.

Growing in Hospitality Through Learning from Non-Westerners

When there is a sincere desire to cultivate community, the idea of lifestyle hospitality is often undervalued or misunderstood by the American church, and these misunderstandings create roadblocks to effective fellowship and outreach. This paper will now take time to examine some of the common roadblocks caused by the misunderstanding of hospitality, and will suggest practical ways forward towards the building of connection through community by means of hospitality in a 21st-century American context, learning from the example of and drawing insights from the non-western world.

There is much to be learned, but it must be acknowledged that all too often, westerners are affected by a legacy of centuries of a subtle superiority complex which believes there is nothing to be learned from those from less developed countries. Scott Hagley explains that the modern western missionary mindset's "emphasis on obedient,

strategic, world-changing action [creates] structures . . . [that] are created primarily for one-way traffic . . . It is not necessarily designed for cooperation, partnership, or mutual learning between groups" (2019, 158). Westerners can also tend to suffer from a malady which could be referred to as *resource righteousness*—that is, believing that the culture that has more money, infrastructure, or material resources must be the culture whose members have more valuable insights to share.

It is very difficult to change a centuries-long cultural bias and an unconscious sense of resource righteousness, but desperate times do indeed call for desperate measures, and the loneliness epidemic in America is indeed becoming more desperate by the day. Perhaps there will be a tipping point when Americans decide that our skyrocketing mental health issues and plummeting quality of life assessments have got to change, and then they will be open to looking for answers. This article proposes that life-giving answers can be found in observing and adopting the ancient rhythms of hospitality still kept alive and practiced in many non-western cultures.

It is necessary to pause before continuing further in order to make clear it is not the goal of this work to set up non-western cultures as being inherently holy or pristine. For example, tribalism is sometimes an unintended byproduct of tight-knit communities. There is much to criticize about any culture, and of course, there is great variety between the many cultures broadly described as non-western. Additionally and unfortunately, there are trends towards disconnection in the non-western world as they follow the West's example. At least at this point in history, however, non-westerners tend to retain a certain amount of an ancient, biblically congruent wisdom that westerners have all but entirely lost with regard to the understanding that community is of crucial importance and must be cultivated in order to live wisely and well.

When watching the rhythms of the non-western world to gain insight, one quickly concludes that community is cultivated not primarily through participating in programs but through living lives which value hospitality. Many non-western cultures more closely mirror the cultural norms of biblical times than western culture does, and therefore there are some biblical concepts (such as hospitality) that non-western cultures seem to inherently understand and practice which those in the West struggle to understand and practice (Udall 2022). Speaking of African cultures, missionary Carolyn Butler observes that "the language of the Bible and the culture of the Middle

East fit very well with African culture as it still is today. Although tourism will dominate any internet search for 'hospitality' and 'Africa,' and although urbanisation presents its complexities, hospitality is still an everyday part of African world-views" (2013, 67).

As mentioned above, non-western immigrants tend to cite loneliness and isolation as their biggest struggle in adjusting to their new lives in America. The ubiquity of struggle among immigrants—combined with the statistics on loneliness experienced by locals in the USA—reveals that there is a sense of belonging and community which is markedly missing in this culture that is present in some other cultures. I suggest that the reason for this difference is a differing understanding of the meaning of hospitality.

Could it be that in trading lives of hospitality in pursuit of cultivating our own individual comfort and privacy, we have inadvertently cultivated a loneliness that is corrosive to our souls? There is a better way. Hospitality is more normal, more regular, more everyday than we have been conditioned to think. Moving from a focus on one-time actions (entertaining) to a focus on a day-in-day-out attitude (hospitality) can be humbling, vulnerable, and messy. But each time we reach a guardrail of image management or protection of privacy and go past it, we will be astonished at how unfamiliar yet how beautiful the terrain of a lifestyle of hospitality is.

What an opportunity to partner with non-western believers to bring the return of a sense of belonging in our lonely society or at the very least in our churches. This partnership will require moving beyond the facade of partnership too many have been fond of that involves those from the West taking the lead while assigning cameo roles to non-westerners who are expected to conform unquestioningly to western ways of doing things.

Missiologists have been fond of saying that the increasing rate of migration in the world is a chance to reach immigrants with the gospel, and this is surely true. But what if the increasing rate of migration is also a chance for us to learn from immigrants what true hospitality and true community looks like? Our humble, control-releasing, learning-posture interactions with non-western believers will likely reveal ways that our culture has misunderstood hospitality—the antidote to loneliness and the precursor to community—in several ways, and may well lead us back to beautifully biblical ancient paths where we will find rest for our souls.

Misunderstanding the *What* of Hospitality

As westerners, we tend to misunderstand *what* hospitality is. We conflate the idea with the idea of festive entertaining. The biblical definition of hospitality is "love of strangers" (Heb 13:3, Tit 1:8) and the Cambridge dictionary definition echoes this idea: "the act of being friendly and welcoming to guests and visitors." The dictionary definition of the word "entertaining," however, is "the act of inviting people to your home and giving them food and drink."

While entertaining is centered on the *action* of the host, hospitality is centered on the *attitude* of the host. While entertaining is a programmatic performance, hospitality is a practice of presence. While entertaining requires planning in advance and providing a certain level of festivity, the practice of hospitality allows for fluidity: it can be spontaneous, does not need to include anything special in terms of menu or venue, and has the focus of simple welcome and togetherness.

Hospitality and entertaining can exist side by side, and entertaining is certainly not wrong if someone finds planning events to be enjoyable. But entertaining is not a biblical command, whereas hospitality is. Unfortunately, western Christians have sometimes let the intimidation factor of entertaining prevent them from engaging in the simple biblical practice of hospitality. Instead of viewing hospitality as planning an event, it should be seen as simply practicing love and welcome and making space for connection. This mentality changes the focus and ratchets down the pressure levels.

Misunderstanding the *When* of Hospitality

When hospitality is mentioned, what typically comes to mind for westerners is the fact that we should plan to invite another family over for dinner in a few weeks. It is something that can be checked off of a list—*invite the Johnsons for dinner*. It is a good thing and should indeed be done! But to truly aspire to adhere to the biblical qualifications for elders (which, most would agree, it would be advisable for all believers to strive towards), one should not only show hospitality but should "be . . . hospitable" (1 Tim 3:2), which conveys the idea of being "fond of guests," "given to hospitality," or "a lover of hospitality" (Blue Letter Bible 2020). This goes beyond an occasional Saturday night get-together—it points to a lifestyle characterized by openness and readiness to receive others.

Missionary Del Chinchen tells the story of a missionary couple who shared with him how disappointed they were that after many years of ministry which included inviting many Africans to their home in an effort to be hospitable, they were never once invited back in the same manner. Chinchen asked them to consider that perhaps they should broaden their understanding of what hospitality is (2000, 472). Though inviting someone two weeks in advance to eat dinner at your home at a predetermined time and date is indeed a valid expression of hospitality, it is not the *only* expression. It is very likely that the missionary couple would have been welcome at any of their African friends' homes at any time but culturally it was not seen as necessary to plan a get-together in advance. Indeed, in some cultures planning in advance implies that there is distance and formality in the relationship, as true friends are expected to just drop by unexpectedly.

It can be difficult to even imagine what a life that involves friends just dropping by would look like in our overwhelming, bursting-at-the-seams schedules. I am not suggesting a wholesale application of every aspect of hospitality as practiced in non-western cultures because it would not be contextual or realistic, but it is worth considering bending away from some of our cultural extremes in favor of a healthier middle ground informed by other cultures' valid interpretations of what hospitality can look like.

As westerners, we tend to be overly focused on *chronos* time (literal minutes and hours), packing our calendars in a way that theoretically works, but that leaves no room for *kairos* time (God-ordained moments in the spirit of Ephesians 5:16 with the idea of "the right or opportune time"). Non-westerners seem to have more of an understanding of the need to make room for *kairos*, for surprise, for serendipity, for spontaneity. Interacting with non-westerners can wake us up to the dangers of an over-focus on *chronos* time and give us insights into what making room for *kairos* moments might look like in our actual lives. In his book, *Contact: The Shaping Power of Intentional Interactions*, Tyler White shares that while he worked as a case manager for a refugee resettlement organization, he would often pick up newly arrived refugees for various appointments because they did not have their driver's licenses and would find them not ready to go, but warmly eager to share tea and conversation. While conversations about the importance of timeliness for appointments were in order, White also shares that he wishes he had arrived earlier than necessary in order to be able to accept the refugee

families' gracious hospitality (White 2020, 89-90), thereby holding *chronos* and *kairos* time in balance.

Rather than viewing our calendars as a zero-sum game, where the person who packs the most in wins, we should consider learning from the example of our non-western brothers and sisters in order to bring our lives into balance, not by ignoring *chronos* time altogether, but by making room for and protecting margin in our lives so as to create an openness that is ready for *kairos* moments of hospitality, both in our homes and in other locations in which we find ourselves.

Hosting a dinner as an isolated incident can be checked off of a list, but *being hospitable* is not a task. It is merely creating the context in which we can focus on people, who are nearly constantly in a state of messy middle, but with whom we can experience God-appointed *kairos* moments and understand meaning in life that goes beyond the minutes and hours ticking by or to-do list items being completed.

Misunderstanding the *Where* of Hospitality

When hospitality is mentioned, too often our minds go to a space of self-critique. There is too much clutter in our homes. We do not have enough space. We have an embarrassing propensity to order pizza rather than cook after work. Our children's energy level is maniacal. We are not sparkling conversationalists when we are tired. There are so many self-critical reasons for barring our doors so that they cannot open to welcome guests.

Because hospitality is not about entertaining or about image, we can free ourselves from the stranglehold of perfection, recognizing that things will never be perfect enough for us to feel entirely comfortable to open our homes. Opening our homes requires vulnerability and often includes awkwardness. We fear awkwardness because we have forgotten that awkwardness is the precursor to connection or intimacy of any kind. When we shy away from awkwardness, we are left with loneliness.

In any well-told story, there is a scene where readers or viewers are privy to the moment when acquaintances decide to be friends, friends decide to band together to fight a common enemy or accomplish a goal, or two people begin to fall in love. Almost

always, these moments involve some awkwardness, because there's a moment when the questions *Are we all in? Are we moving deeper into relationship with each other?* have been asked, and the answer has not yet been decided. Depending on how this powerful moment is viewed, it can be frightening or exciting! If we view the force of awkwardness as frightening, we will become like the side of a magnet that repels others. Conversely, if we view the force of awkwardness as exciting, we will become like the side of a magnet that is drawn to others. The point of hospitality is to make exciting moments of awkwardness possible, and then to move through them towards the beautiful landscape of deepening relationships on the other side.

The antidote to awkwardness is to think about the other person, which incidentally is something a good host always does. In his book, *Adorning the Dark: Thoughts on Community Calling and the Mystery of Making*, Andrew Peterson talks about overcoming his overwhelming feelings of awkwardness during photo shoots. At first, he was understandably very focused on himself—how his clothes fit, where to put his hands, etc. But then a friend told him that if he would simply focus on the person behind the camera and try to connect with them, everything would feel natural and the details would take care of themselves. This wise friend was right: when Peterson focused on having a conversation with the cameraman, he smiled genuinely, stood naturally, looked approachable, and ended up with nice photos. In the same way, if we stop thinking about how our home looks, whether we are sparkling conversationalists, how the food tastes, etc., and focus instead on connecting with our guests, the rest will take care of itself. As Rosaria Butterfield memorably quips: "Hospitality is necessary whether you have cat hair on the couch or not. People will die of chronic loneliness sooner than they will cat hair in the soup" (2018, 111).

Though it is worth saying that our homes do not need to be perfect in order to invite others in, it should also be mentioned that hospitality need not be limited to our homes. Since hospitality is primarily about an attitude (not an action or a location), it can be shown in third spaces and even when one is a guest in another's home. Hospitality is not one-way. To be a good guest requires a kind of hospitality, after all, since "we must learn to pay careful attention, to receive others and receive their norms and ideas" (Hagley 2019, 27). "For the Christian," says Scott Hagley, "hospitality provides an image of the gospel. We are simultaneously the guest and host of the Triune God. So also, we relate to one another in a fluid interchange between guest and host" (2019, 29).

With immigrants in particular, it can be more hospitable to be a guest in their homes than to invite them to be a guest in ours. When inviting immigrants to our home, we are also expecting them to conform to our norms, eat our kind of food, and follow our agenda. This is not to say inviting immigrants to our home is a bad idea; it should be done, but visiting should be a two-way street. By also enthusiastically becoming a guest in immigrants' homes, we are willingly shouldering the burden of discomfort and accepting the pressure of learning a new way of doing things. Becoming a grateful guest is powerfully communicating to an immigrant friend that we welcome them not just when they are trying hard to conform to our culture's expectations, but also exactly as they are in their own home, living life as they naturally do.

For Further Research

This article has merely scratched the surface of the great potential for the American church to learn from the non-western world in order to broaden its understanding and strengthen its practice of hospitality to be more effective in evangelism, discipleship, and missionary efforts in an increasingly globalized but lonely world.

Many things remain to be researched if this potential will be turned into reality. Questions for further research include:

- How could small groups be promoted in a way that views them as part of a larger ecosystem of hospitable church and home ministry? If it is accepted that small group participation should not be the sole benchmark of the health of a church, what other benchmarks should be considered? What would empowering a congregation to cultivate a lifestyle of hospitality (that includes but it not limited to small group participation) look like?

- What materials exist in non-western cultures which inculcate the value of hospitality? Is this value instilled mostly in upbringing at home or is it reinforced by church teaching? What resources on the value of hospitality are or could be produced by non-western churches both to encourage and instruct western churches and also as a preventative measure for young non-western believers, who are following western trends towards increased isolation?

- How does resource righteousness undermine true partnership between western and non-western believers both in the United States and abroad? How could this often- unconscious attitude be identified and mitigated in church teaching and missionary training efforts in the West? How could non-western believers be empowered to divest themselves of this idea?

- How do non-western people's practice of hospitality change when they leave their home country and settle in the United States? What elements are retained? If it is accepted that a non-western practice of hospitality more closely mirrors the biblical understanding of hospitality, what do the changes tell us about the challenges of contextualization or potential creative adaptations of a non-western practice of hospitality in a western environment?

- Practically speaking, how can an appreciation of *kairos* time be incorporated into a culture which is focused on *chronos* time? How can immigrants be informed about living according to *chronos* time without losing an appreciation of *kairos* time? How can *kairos* and *chronos* time, as well as a focus on task or time and a focus on relationship, be kept in appropriate balance? How can the interaction between different cultures promote this balance?

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Conversion to Christ as Spiritual Migration

Vol 3:1 2023

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Introduction

Just as with all spiritual realities, there are many different ways we can express what happens when someone turns to Christ. In evangelical Christian circles we tend to prefer terms like "born again," coming from Jesus' words: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:3 ESV).[1] Or we talk of someone being "saved," as in the case of the Philippian jailer: "Then he brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household'" (Acts 16:30-31).

Both of these are truly beautiful word pictures, but I fear that we have failed to recognize that they paint *incomplete* images. Just as God is truly our Father, the still Bible uses a multitude of other terms and concepts to express who he is—creator, king, righteous judge, shepherd, among others. If we limited ourselves to the term Father we would have a woefully poor theology. In the same way, our theology of conversion suffers if we limit our thinking about it to only a few of the many possible terms or conceptualizations available.

Furthermore, like many words that are part of our Christian vocabulary, the common words for conversion have come to be loaded with unrecognized, and often unintended, theological frameworks. For example, our word choice of "born again" tends to project the idea that coming to Christ is an event, a singular moment in time that can be clearly documented with date-time stamp, such as the day and time a baby is born. This can produce a whole circus of questionable church practices such as expecting people to be able to testify of the exact moment of their conversion as a prerequisite to baptism or ordination.

[1] All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted

Likewise, how should we understand what happened in the lives of Peter, John, or any of the other disciples? At what moment in time were they "born again"? Was it at their baptism, or on Resurrection Sunday in the upper room, or perhaps at some other moment? We have to be careful because our choice of a particular "moment" has theological implications.

Moreover, what about a man that eventually became a coworker of Paul, the Jewish teacher Apollos:

> Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately (Acts 18:24-26).

The story of Apollos is a bit murky. The text says he "taught accurately the things concerning Jesus," but his teaching, and presumably his personal experience, seems to have been based on nothing more than the message of John the Baptist, which was certainly lacking core gospel elements such as the cross and resurrection. At what moment in time was he saved? All this serves to remind us that turning to Christ is a much more complicated picture than common Christian terms might express.

While this may be only a minor problem when communicating with other Christians, it can be a huge obstacle on the frontiers of mission because the terms we use build the mental frameworks in which we conduct our ministry. For example, if I am thinking exclusively in terms of my Muslim friend be "born again," with its imagery of a painful, dramatic arrival, I might miss signs that he is already following the example of the Jews in Berea in Acts 17 who did not suddenly convert, but who appear to have slowly come to believe in Jesus as they carefully examined the Scriptures (Acts 17:10-12). In fact, when we frame salvation as a moment in time, we might actually be discouraging our Muslim friends from following the teachings of Jesus who said: "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" (Luke 14:28). Therefore, those of us called to reach people within the house of Islam need to develop more robust ways of thinking about how Muslims encounter and come to embrace Christ.

This article will explore a different way to think about conversion that helps us move away from a focus on a singular even, and towards a richer understanding of conversion. Could it be that a Muslim's experience of turning to Jesus is better understood through similarities to the experience of Abram leaving Ur of the Chaldeans, or that of Israel as they escaped Egyptian bondage? In other words, conversion on the frontier of mission is better understood as people moving from one spiritual homeland to another—the metaphor of spiritual migration.

Metaphorical Reasoning

The use of metaphors has always been one of the ways God helped people understand spiritual realities. Whether we look at Abram being told that he would have decendants like the stars of the heavens (Gen 15:5), Isaiah calling Israel God's vineyard (chapter 5), or Peter describing the church as a royal priesthood, the Bible is filled with metaphoric reasoning. Furthermore, in the gospels, the use of metaphor explodes, with our Lord Jesus greatly employing this rhetorical device. Over and over he said things such as "The kingdom of heaven is like . . . " and invited his hearers to think about what they did not understand (the kingdom of heaven) by comparing it to something they did understand (e.g., field or a wedding). This is a perfect expression of the use of metaphor as a reasoning device, and it would seem that Jesus used this linguistic structure more than any other.

Metaphors and analogies work so well because they structure our understanding through a simple comparison of two objects or ideas which are similar in one way or another. Metaphorical reasoning uses these similarities to build what we might call conceptual bridges, connecting something that is familiar, concrete, and easily understood to something that is more abstract or esoteric.

Although the use of analogies is not so common in the West today, through history, metaphorical reasoning has played an important, if sometimes mysterious, role in philosophical, legal, and even scientific problem-solving (Barta, 2019). This form of logic is particularly helpful when we are trying to understand something that cannot be directly observed. Thus we would argue that metaphorical reasoning is a near perfect fit for thinking about the changes wrought in the human heart at conversion. One of the reasons metaphors work so well is that they, along with parables and other forms of

analogy, function in human communication as decentering devices. They help people step back from their presuppositions and ask important questions like *What is really going on here?* and *What is this telling me about the big picture?* This is particularly important when discussing phenomenon with which we are overly familiar. Thus the decentering aspect of using migration as an analogy for conversion can prove useful for those of us who have grown up thinking exclusively through more common Christian frameworks. Therefore, when we use a new metaphor to think about a well-known topic we are more likely to see new dimensions of significance and meaning in what was previously routine and overly familiar.

In light of the decentering power of using a new metaphor, I believe the extended allegory of spiritual migration can help us move toward a deeper understanding of what happens as Muslims are delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved son (Col 1:13). There are several aspects of human migration that could offer us spiritual insights via metaphoric reasoning; however, in this article, I will explore two: the reasons people migrate and the path those migrations often take.

What Makes Conversion Valid?

Before we can conduct an objective and robust examination of these factors, there is a common evangelical presupposition that needs to be challenged. Many Christians assume that if a person has a true conversion, the reasons that moved them were spiritual. People whose conversion is closely connected to practical reasons or physical realities are often viewed with suspicion. Of course, missionaries must seek to discern the sincerity of a person's conversion, but I fear that much of our skepticism is rooted in a false dichotomy of human nature. The evangelical missions community often acts as if only spiritual things affect the spiritual man, and only physical things impact the physical man. However, once we bring that idea out into the light, we quickly see its error because there is no solid scriptural support for such a sharp separation of the spiritual and physical sides of man. The things that affect humans physically also impact them spiritually and perhaps *vice versa*. Thus, observable social factors can lead Muslims to make very real spiritual changes just as surely as the more spiritual things in their lives do.

When social scientists consider human migration, one of the first things they do is classify the reasons people move into those which *push* people to leave where they currently live and those which *pull* them toward a new a destination. Some examples of push factors include famine, war, and poverty whereas pull factors include things such as better jobs, good schools, or political freedom. In most cases, if not all, people are motivated by a combination of push and pull factors (Fouberg, Murphy, and de Blij, 2015, 68-73).

Push Factors

Over the past 25 years I have interviewed more than one hundred Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) and had countless informal conversations with MBBs in which they describe how they found new life in Christ. Many times I have heard what can only be called push factors in their conversion. Perhaps the clearest description came from an old Uzbek man who recounted an incident that happened at the mosque one afternoon (author interview 2012). He saw his fellow Muslim men spitting chewing tobacco into the drinking water flowing to a village:

> I was very angry but couldn't say anything because there were several of them … that kind of attitude made me wonder, "Why do believers like them do that?" They do it because they say, "If you bring offerings, it removes God's anger from you." So, if you bring offerings, you can do anything; it's sort of like bribing God. So, in the Islamic world people do not change, but they feel free to do whatever because all they need to do is bring offering and they will be released from their sin. So they remain sinful and never change. That's their main principle. They felt free to spit into water that others drink. All of them did! *That really disgusted me and pushed me away from Islam* [emphasis mine].

This MBB clearly articulated what I have heard many others imply—that certain behaviors in their Muslim society caused them to lose interest in the religion handed down from their forefathers. In this case, it was an obvious disregard for the health and wellbeing of others which he recognized was rooted in the theological framework of local Islam (Abdul el-Zien 1977). Although attraction to the church was later part of this man's story, this was a factor that clearly pushed a 70-year-old man away from Islam.

One common push factor is religious nominalism and hypocrisy because people are often repulsed when religion is obviously little more than a social mask, especially in the home. One MBB related:

> My mom . . . [took] . . . all responsibility for the family because my father was [an] alcoholic actually. He was a drunk and we did not have peace in our home . . . I remember when I went to school the first time. My mom brought me to the school and said "wait for your father when all your lessons will be finished. Wait for father and he will pick you up." But I was the last in the class. Nobody came to take me from the school. I went home by myself . . . I remember this feeling still. I was so angry, like nobody could come to take me . . . when I was closer to my house I heard my father's voice . . . he opened the door and he was drunk. It was so painful to me (author interview 2013).

Unfortunately, this kind of push does not always turn someone to Christ. It might push them completely out of all religion into atheism or agnosticism.

Another push factor can sometimes be seen in a reaction to Orthodox Islam itself. Many MBBs report that the more they learned about their religion, the less they wanted to follow its path. Sometimes it was the harshness of Allah in the Qur'an, other times it was the some of the theological implications of Muhammad's revelations that pushed them away. One man's story is a particularly good illustration of this. He was an Islamic law scholar and judge. Although he had studied Sharia for many years, he found himself repulsed by what he found as he researched the hadiths in order to make one particular ruling. He was called upon to render a judgment in the torrid case of a Muslim who raped his non-Muslim neighbor's wife:

> But as I studied the related hadiths, I realized that this man was guiltless according to Sharia. He was in a long-standing conflict with this neighbor, so taking her was considered a "spoil of war" and perfectly legal. I could not believe this! How could this be right? How could this be the just in the eyes of an Almighty God? (author interview 2016).

The ruling he was forced to make based on Islamic law was simply more than this honest and sensitive man could take. It launched him on a slow journey, lasting more

than ten years, in which he came to know Christ.

A final push factor that I wish to explore is when Muslims feel their existential questions are left unanswered by the Islam they know. Sometimes these questions made Allah seem distant, even as they tried hard to find him. One person shared:

> I would get depressed because I could not please God, no matter how hard I tried. So gradually I became disappointed because I felt like Allah was far away, that he didn't care about me, so he intentionally created all these hard laws that were impossible to observe . . . Over time I became disappointed in Islam (author interview 2012).

Other times existential questions arose from the hardships of life. One woman recounted:

> I remember when I got married, it was a bad marriage . . . I remember [asking God] "Why is my life so difficult? Why do I have to suffer all the time? Why did you even create us, people?" Because my first husband was a drug addict and it was very hard (author interview 2013).

Henri Gooren theorized that people become religious seekers and open to other religions when they become dissatisfied with the meanings generated by their natal religion (2007, 339). If at a crisis point in life people encounter other possible explanations, other ways of making sense of life, then they are likely to migrate towards those.

However, someone cannot cannot migrate to a place that they do not know exists. When someone is pushed from their natal religion, they must also feel the pull to something else. That is why observors speak of push-pull factors in one breath.

Pull Factors

When people physically migrate, it is natural and expected that they are drawn toward places which they believe are better in some way. It may be more politically stable or offer better economic options. They move in the hope of finding something better than

what they had before. Furthermore, the improvement must appear to be very significant because the cost of migration is high. In spiritual migration, such as from Islam to Christ, the same is true.

In the seminal work, *Acts of Faith*, Stark and Finke spend a great deal of time exploring the idea of the costs associated with religion, particularly of changing religions. They point out that people are rational beings, thus they make rational choices, including those about whatever costs are associated with changing their religion (2000, 86). In other words, whenever a certain factor pulls a Muslim toward Christ, that factor represents something they subjectively feel is worth the price. This is important to keep in mind as we consider the various pull factors below because whether or not we consider them significant, many Muslims view these things as valuable enough that they would pay a dear price to obtain them.

One pull factor I have often heard recounted is the good reputation of Christians. This can come from several different perspectives. Sometimes it is the godly lives of missionaries or local, evangelistically-minded Christians with whom a Muslim has contact. This is especially powerful when it is a family member who has converted. One woman shared:

> Every time he [husband] came home drunk I would scold and curse him . . . I cursed so badly. . . The day I came to Jesus, He also healed my tongue. I stopped using that dirty language. My oldest daughter saw that change and she said after two weeks, "Mom, can I come to that group with you?" I said, "Why?" She said, "Well, it must be a very good place. You have stopped cursing!" (author interview 2011).

Lofland and Stark called this the draw of "positive deviant behavior" (1965). That is, in the eyes of the local community, a former Muslim who now professes Christ is a social deviant, socially their behavior deviates from expected norms, and specifically in ways that are expected to be of ill repute. Therefore, when they demonstrate good behavior it is even more significant precisely because local expectations are that social deviants act the opposite.

Another common pull factor is supernatural occurrences, including dreams, visions, physical healings, and other supernatural encounters. While each convert's story is

unique, the commonality of this pull factor is that in some way or another, God in Christ interrupted their life in a way that was both supernatural and undeniable.

Westerners, including missionaries, struggle to understand the place of dreams and visions. Yet they stand at or near the top of the list when you discuss the supernatural with Muslims who have turned to Christ. Testimony of a Muslim imam who converted to Christ illustrates this well:

> My niece gave me the Injil, and I was very interested to read it. But each time I tried, I soon felt a strange presence in the room, as if someone had walked in. This scared me and so I put the book up on a shelf. Finally, I pulled it down and started to read it strongly, quickly going through many chapters. Then, once again I felt that same presence. I look up and there was a man in a white robe standing near me. He spoke and said, "You know who I am. Why won't you believe in me?" I knew it was Isa, so I immediately fell on my face and said, "yes, yes, I do believe in you"! (author interview 2015).

Rick Kronk has documented and sought to explain this phenomena in his excellent book, *Dreams and Visions: Muslims Miraculous Journey to Jesus* (2010). He asserts that Muslims are culturally prepared to respond to supernatural encounters in a way that modern Western people are not. Dreams, and their daytime equivalent, visions, are a deep and significant part of the Islamic worldview and theology because Muhammad received his supposed revelations in this manner.

We must not think that supernatural pull factors are simply the result of Pentecostal and Charismatic influence in contemporary frontier mission. In writing about the early centuries of the Christian era, Lamin Sanneh writes, "Visions, dreams, ecstasy, exorcism, and healings featured prominently in the mission of Christianity for many centuries" (2008, 59). Thus the supernatural pull factor is not inconsistent with early historic Christian mission.

Although we should rightly celebrate the Lord using these supernatural means to pull Muslims toward himself, it is important to always remember that dreams or visions do not bring a complete witness in and of themselves. This supernatural pull factor is incomplete without someone or something bearing witness to the content of the gospel.

It might be a person, it might be a copy of the Bible, it could even be a gospel recording or video of some kind. But in one way or another the dream or vision must be accompanied by human participation.

Conversion as Non-linear Movement

In the past, evangelicals have often imagined conversion as a singular event. This is probably due to the prominent place Saul's "Damascus road" experience plays in our theology. This has changed some in recent years, but conversion as a singular moment continues to influence mission thinking. But what if people don't always know what their final destination is when they start down the path we call conversion? Based on the testimonies of MBBs who have painted their conversion story as more of a complicated migration journey than a point-in-time decision, I believe we ought to think of conversion as more of a a movement through metaphysical space.

When people migrate from their homelands, it is often a long and circuitous process. They may first move from their village to the capital city, then to a city in a nearby country. Since the first step is often the hardest, it may take them two or three tries to make it in the first new location, so that they bounce back and forth a few times. Specialists in human geography sometimes use the term "step migration" to capture this process (Conway, 1980). However, even this term can be deceptive. Steps imply order and plan, something that may be partly or even completely lacking when a migrant sets out to leave their homeland. What we understand as their final destination is often only known in retrospect, after many moves forward, sideways, even backward at times.

In the same way, when MBBs describe their personal experience of coming to Christ, it is seldom a simple switch from one religion to another. Even those who tell of a dramatic initial conversion experience often back-fill their story with details of several spiritual turns or unexpected twists. Perhaps this is because they have many obstacles to navigate—social, religious, political and economic. Consequently, their conversion stories do not usually play out as straightforward linear movements, as if they were going directly from one socio-religious place to another. The circuitous path many MBBs follow to becoming disciples of Christ can take many shapes.

One of the ways that coming to Christ looks like a step migration is that the final destination is often not in view at the beginning. Step migrations are often characterized by an initial move to a larger city in the same country before eventually settling in a distant foreign land. In a similar way, the last thing on most Muslim spiritual migrants' minds is joining a Christian church. One young MBB who came to Christ after moving to the U.S. for university study talked about his first step:

> I was challenged by the lives of my Christian friends. I thought to myself, "I should be a better Muslim." So I started really following the path of Islam, trying to be as good in my faith as they were in theirs. But the more I tried, the more I failed, and the more attractive their way of life was (author interview 2017).

Just as many physical migrants move to a big city in their own country to improve their life, many Muslims start the migration of conversion by first making changes in their lives *as Muslims*. Only much later can these be seen as their first steps in a journey to Christ—an ultimate destination they never would have imagined at the time.

Another expression of this step migration is when we see people spiritually moving sideways rather than forward. For many Muslims, the first step of their spiritual migration is toward an expression of Christianity that reflects missionary culture, but eventually they take more of a lateral movement. That is, while continuing their faith in Christ, they moved to a more indigenous expression of their faith and one that does not include being part of what they now view as foreign Christianity.

One couple shared with me about how they joined the missionary-led Baptist church when they first came to Christ and remained there for several years until they faced a deep spiritual crisis at the death of the man's father:

> When my husband's father died, we realized that we didn't know any of our relatives anymore, we were out of contact with them for so long! We were so lost . . . we did not even know what rituals to do. We were so far from our culture . . . We felt like we had lost our identity. Until that time we told everyone that we were Christians . . . but no more. Now we are just followers of Isa. We are no longer part of a church, but now we have a small group where four, five, or six families come together to talk, eat and share. We take turns at whose house we meet (author interview 2012).

This couple's conversion journey started out as a dramatic joining of the "foreign religion," but eventually life led them down a more complicated path toward experimentation of being both a follower of Christ and part of their own people. Not everyone has this kind of experience. However, it is possible that it is more common than many missionaries realize because they are used to thinking only in terms of the dramatic first step, rather than a long spiritual journey.

Over the years I have heard many MBBs recount this spiritual step migration process which led them through different expressions of their faith. One very good MBB friend, who is now a cross-cultural missionary, put it this way:

> I wish I had known at first what I know now. If I had not gone so far away culturally from my family, I probably could have reached some of them. That was all I knew then, but later I became more sensitive. I now see the need to stay closer to my culture rather than emphasize our differences. I would try to stay nearer so they could see my life and ask questions (author interview 2013).

Describing this spiritual migration, Lewis Rambo speaks of a person who develops and grows beyond an exclusively personal conversion into having active engagement with social structures and cultural institutions of their natal society (1993, 147). To put it missiologically, such a complicated step migration may be one of the ways converts eventually contextualize their faith praxis and develop into effective evangelists among their own people. This instinctive contextualization is not a modern anthropological construct. It reflects an ancient and deep impulse in the Christian faith, dating at least back to the early centuries of the Christian faith. Lamin Sanneh, an MBB himself, has observed that our faith has always been "subjected to the principle of transmission to the dynamics of reception and adaptation" and that there will always be "the primacy of indigenous appropriation" (2008, 47). Thus some of the non-linear movement we hear expressed so often in conversion narratives are examples of this "indigenous appropriation" working out in individual lives of Muslims as they settle down in their new spiritual homeland.

Emotional Implications of Migration

When we engage Muslims with the gospel we are hopefully engaging them through more than intellect, but with and through emotions as well. Thus it is helpful to consider some of the emotional dimensions of human migration and what insights it might offer for spiritual migrants. There are perhaps many, but we will only take time to explore three.

Migration Can Be Traumatic

Since many terrible things are driving Muslims from their ancestral homelands (war, terrorism, famine), we often think of trauma as a cause of migration. While that is true, we must also consider that the very act of migration can generate significant emotional trauma due to the profound dislocation and emotional distress migrants experience as they attempt to reestablish themselves in a new land. Thus, when we apply the metaphor of migration to conversion, we begin to recognize that many Muslims experience confusion, distress, and related emotional trauma as they turn to Christ. A close friend once told me: "For the first few years I did not know who I was. Was I still a Muslim? Was I now a Christian? It was a very confusing time for me. All I could do was to hang on to Jesus and hope things would get better someday" (author interview 2004). This trauma of spiritual migration can also extend to the new believer's entire family. One MBB shared in a conference:

> I wept when I realized how much pain my family was feeling because I had become [a] Christian. They really felt I was dead to them, and when I thought about how I caused that pain, I was crushed. It is still a good thing that I came to know Christ, but it caused my family so much pain, and that hurt me when I finally allowed myself to think about it.

Missionaries and Christians in general tend to ignore this dimension of conversion because we are focused on the immense, eternal benefits of coming to Christ. However, by framing conversion through the metaphorical lens of migration, we can appreciate the pain it can cause in the here and now. By recognizing this we become more compassionate and understanding with new believers, encouraging them to process their pain in healthy ways rather than hiding it because they feel it is unworthy of

Christ.

Continued Emotional Connection to the Homeland

No matter how bad the situation was, and no matter how great the new land is, people normally desire some kind of ongoing connection to their homeland. The land of our childhood has a powerful though often subliminal hold on our minds. This is because of "episodic memory"—memory that is linked to particular places, times, and emotions (Stratford 2012). Whenever someone migrates, episodic memory acts as a strong emotional attachment to their past, no matter the push or pull forces involved. We often see this manifested as migrants set up ethnic enclaves in their new land to help them maintain a sense of connection to the old.

Sometimes the need for continued connection to one's spiritual homeland is manifest in the almost unexplainable power of sensory memory. I remember once visiting with a MBB evangelist who had planted several churches. On the way to visit me he had this experience in a taxi:

> When the driver figured out I was a *kafir,* he quickly pushed in a cassette tape. As it played my heart was so touched by the sound of someone chanting the Qur'an. I did not want to feel that way. I did not want to listen. But there was just something about it. The sound was so moving. It was really hard not to be drawn in (author conversation 2008).

Similarly, an Iranian believer in the U.S. spoke of how he reacted when he heard Farsi spoken for the first time in 20 years:

> I started weeping uncontrollably. I don't know where it came from. When I ran away from Iran and Islam, I thought I had forgotten everything about my people and my culture. But suddenly the pain was so real, it had been so deep I had never thought about it until suddenly it was in my face (author interview 2017).

This web of emotional attachments is usually *involuntarily* evoked and catch the person unprepared making it easy to lose control in the moment. We should not be surprised that many MBBs continue to feel a strong sense of attachment to their

spiritual homeland. Unfortunately, many missionaries misinterpret these emotional attachments as disloyalty on the part of the new believer. Yet if we apply the metaphor of spiritual migration it becomes easier to see that such longings for the familiar are simply part of being human, because all people have a history. In this case, it is a personal history connected to a Muslim way of life. This can help us sympathize with new believer if they occasionally struggle with all they have left behind for Christ, rather than judging them as weak disciples.

Some Do Not Stay

Despite all the dangers faced and obstacles overcome, not all migrants remain in their new location. For some people the pull of their homeland and perhaps disappointment with the new land are too great. Eventually return to the land they left. This is a dimension of the migration metaphor I would prefer not to explore, but not all Muslims who turn to Christ remain in his body. Obviously this issue has a great deal of theological freight that is beyond the scope of this article, but in practical terms, it is something that most missionaries will face sooner or later.

Sometimes MBBs, including those we have personally discipled, turn their backs on their new faith and return to Islam. In the very least, they return to their Muslim community. Some MBBs may return to the Muslim community relationally while remaining secret believers in Christ. This probably happens more often than we would like to admit. In fact, due to the very sensitive nature of the subject, we know very little about how or why some MBBs turn back to Islam. Nevertheless, the migration metaphor reminds us to confront this reality honestly.

Conclusion

Humans seem to be hardwired to think in terms of metaphors—word pictures that help us understand a concept. Evangelical Christians have traditionally used only a few key ones to describe the act of conversion, images such as being “born again,” or “saved.” However, no single metaphor can capture all the nuance of a complicated spiritual reality. For this reason, the analogy of spiritual migration can be helpful for gaining a richer understanding of the processes of becoming a disciple of Christ in a frontier mission context. Focusing our thoughts through this lens opened three areas of insight.

First, we considered the concept of push and pull factors. That is, the reasons Muslims turn to Christ can be effectively grouped into those that push them away from Islam, and those that draw them to Christ and his church. Doing this can help us move beyond typical evangelical positions which focus on the attractive power of the gospel, and closer to the messy, complicated world of people who have mixed motivations. The two sides of this equation are deeply interrelated, and are both expressions of God's sovereignty in a person's life—even before they know Christ.

Second, we explored the idea that migration is often non-linear; that is, people seldom move all the way from one religion to another in a single step or in a straight line. This is something social scientists often call step migration. Sometimes people move first to a place closer to home, such as becoming a more devout Muslim. Other times they make lateral moves, such as leaving Western style Christianity to experiment with more indigenous forms. People on the move often do not know their final destination; they are just compelled to go.

Finally we looked at the emotional implications of seeing conversion as a spiritual migration. Migrants usually experience powerful emotions as they move through their journey. In the same way, many Muslims who turn to Christ also face difficult emotions as part of that process. Recognizing this helps us stay more real about their humanity without casting any shadow on the depth of their love for Christ.

For these reasons and others we did not have room to consider, I believe that exploring how people come to Christ through the analogy of human migration offers practical insights into the way the Holy Spirit works and can help us find more robust missiological models for reaching Muslims, and even across other frontiers of the mission world.

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A Purpose Set Forth in Christ: God's Mission of Reconciliation in Ephesians 1–2

Vol 3:1 2023

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The story of Scripture is the story of God's mission of reconciliation. After the fall, sin brings death and destruction into God's world causing enmity and separation in human relationships and God's relationship with humanity. Because of sin, humanity is dependent on God to take the initiative in bringing about peace through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, God's mission of reconciliation is His purposeful action to bring peace to everything in creation affected by sin.

No biblical author expounds on the beauty of God's mission of reconciliation as frequently or deeply as the Apostle Paul. No discussion of reconciliation is complete until the letters of Paul are considered. The concept of reconciliation is essential to Pauline soteriology and his understanding of the *missio Dei*. Some theologians even see it as the center of his theology. Paul's teaching on reconciliation is vast, encompassing more than peace between God and humanity as he applies God's mission of reconciliation to humanity's relationship with God (Col 1:21–22), mankind's broken relationships (Eph 2:11–22), and even the brokenness of creation (Rom 8:20–21). The reconciliation of all things in Christ is God's purpose set forth in His Son (Eph 1:9).

Although Paul's writings are not overflowing with uses of *καταλλάσσω* (to reconcile)*, ἀποκαταλλάσσω* (to reconcile), and *καταλλαγή* (reconciliation), the concept of God's mission of reconciliation is a central theme in his letters. As Leon Morris (1976, 186) argues, throughout Paul's writing "it is clear that the concept of reconciliation is sometimes present when the actual word itself does not occur." Within Paul's corpus, Romans 5:1–11, 2 Corinthians 5:11–21, Ephesians 2:11–22, and Colossians 1:20–22 receive the most attention in discussions on reconciliation, and rightfully so, as each of these passages contains clear teaching on God's reconciling work. However, I contend that Ephesians 1–2, though containing few uses of the terms peace and reconciliation,

is one of Paul's most important passages on God's mission of reconciliation. Paul beautifully expounds and applies God's mission of reconciliation throughout Ephesians 1–2 in ways not found in other passages on reconciliation.

To understand the importance of Ephesians 1–2 in Paul's theology of reconciliation, it's helpful to understand the makeup of Ephesians 1–2 and what Paul says about God's mission of reconciliation in his other letters. It is also necessary to examine the opening chapters of Ephesians to see specific ways Paul emphasizes reconciliation as a part of God's mission. In these chapters, Paul celebrates 1) blessing and God's mission of reconciliation, 2) the trinitarian nature of reconciliation, and 3) reconciliation between peoples.

Ephesians 1–2

Few books in the Bible compare to Ephesians in terms of theological depth and clarity. Like no other Pauline letter, Ephesians focuses on the breadth, depth, and trinitarian nature of God's mission of salvation. "Cosmic reconciliation and unity in Christ" is the major theme throughout Ephesians (O'Brien 1999, 58). God's mission is a connecting theme in the different sections that make up the first two chapters of Ephesians. More specifically, Paul emphasizes the overall goal of God's mission: the reconciliation of all things affected by sin.

After his typical greeting in Ephesians 1:1–2, Paul praises God for the abundance of spiritual blessings Christians experience in Christ (Eph 1:3–14). This section focuses on God's salvific mission and how each person of the Trinity participates in the work of reconciliation. The following section contains Paul's reasons for thanksgiving and prayer, including the inheritance of the saints, God's power towards His children, and God's exaltation of the Son, who has been raised from the dead, seated at the right hand of the Father, given the name above all names, and made Lord over all creation and head of the church (Eph 1:15–23). In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul reminds the Ephesians that they once were alienated from God because of their sin and disobedience, but in mercy, God rescued them and made them alive together with Christ through faith. In these verses, Paul focuses on how individuals are saved by grace through faith. The following section—Ephesians 2:11–22—shifts to a corporate focus where Paul celebrates the victory of God's mission of reconciliation, which has not only brought the Gentiles near

to God, but also reconciled the Gentiles and Jews into one body in Christ. The closing verses provide a climax: God's reconciling work forms Jews and Gentiles into a holy temple, "a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph 2:22, ESV). Ephesians 1–2 contain few explicit references to reconciliation or peace, and yet, the concept of reconciliation is the driving thought within these chapters.

Reconciliation in Paul's Theology

What is reconciliation, and what part does it play in God's mission of salvation? According to Porter (1993, 695), "Reconciliation is the Pauline concept in which enmity between God and humanity, or between human groups, is overcome and peaceful relations restored on the basis of the work of Christ." This definition is a good starting point for thinking about reconciliation as it acknowledges the problem, presents the solution, and explains how reconciliation takes place. Because humanity is sinful and God demands holiness, there is enmity between God and mankind (Morris 1976, 196). However, God, in love, takes the initiative in reconciliation, forgiving sin to establish peaceful relations through the cross of Christ. Outside of his writing in Ephesians, the concept of reconciliation in Pauline theology is best understood by examining three passages: Romans 5:1–11, 2 Corinthians 5:17–21, and Colossians 1:20–22. As Paul explains God's mission in terms of reconciliation throughout these passages, common themes are used. Recognizing these common themes is important as they also appear in Ephesians 1–2, despite Paul not using explicit reconciliation language in these chapters.

Romans 5:1–11

Paul begins Romans 5 by bringing together two soteriological concepts: justification and peace. Paul writes, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). Peace and justification are not synonymous, but they are closely related concepts. As Murray (1968, 158–159) explains, "The background of [justification] is condemnation and subjection to the wrath of God and it contemplates our acceptance with God as righteous. The background of [peace] is our alienation from God and it contemplates our instatement in the favour of God and in the light of his countenance." Because of sin, mankind is alienated from God, but

through faith in the work of Jesus Christ, believers are declared righteous, their sins forgiven, enmity removed, and reconciliation with God takes place. This verse demonstrates the relationship between justification and reconciliation in Pauline thought.

In Romans 5:8–11, God's mission of reconciliation takes center stage. Similar to 5:1, Paul connects multiple soteriological themes as he explains God's mission to reconcile.

> But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were still enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom 5:8–11).

Paul's main emphasis is God's reconciling work through Christ. It was not mankind that took the first step towards God, but God who initiates reconciliation by sending His Son to die. Beale (2011, 541) explains, "The implicit idea is that Christ experienced God's hostility and wrath at the cross so that those who believe in Christ and become identified with his death are considered to have also experienced God's eschatological wrath, so that they can now come into a peaceful relationship with him." Sinners who are alienated from God and stand condemned to the wrath of God are justified by the blood of Jesus and reconciled to God. As we will see, Paul connects these same soteriological terms and concepts in Ephesians 1–2.

2 Corinthians 5:17–21

Another passage that is essential for understanding reconciliation in Paul's writings is 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. First, Paul connects a believer's union with Christ to the reconciling work of God. He writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:17–18). Those united to Christ in His death and resurrection are new creations, meaning, the old self and old ways defined by sin and alienation are no more. How exactly do sinners

find favor with God through Christ? Paul explains in verse 21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In order to reconcile sinners, the spotless Lamb of God became a substitute for sinners, taking on sin and punishment while imputing His righteousness to sinners who require it. As Martin (1989, 101) explains, "The sinless Christ took our condemnation, that for us there might be condemnation no more . . . the happy result of this 'transaction' is that as Christ in his sinlessness took responsibility for our wrongdoing, we are gifted with that entity ('the righteousness of God') that permits our acceptance with God." Like Romans 5, Paul emphasizes justification and reconciliation here in 2 Corinthians.

Colossians 1:19–22

Colossians 1:19–22 also deepens our understanding of reconciliation in Pauline theology. Paul writes,

> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross. And you, who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.

Here in Colossians, there are similarities to the passages in Romans and 2 Corinthians, and Ephesians 1–2. Paul once again emphasizes that reconciliation is only possible through what Jesus has accomplished on the cross—He died and shed His blood for humanity. There is also the acknowledgment that the reconciled were once alienated from God and hostile in mind.

But there is one new element that Paul emphasizes from God's mission of reconciliation in Colossians 1:19–22: the reconciling of *all things* in Christ. While Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 5 highlight humanity's reconciliation to God in Christ, Paul expands God's mission of reconciliation to everything affected by sin in Colossians 1. Schreiner (2001, 224) writes, "Reconciliation embraces the entire universe, so that nothing is excluded from its orbit." Colossians 1:15–22 exalts Jesus Christ as Creator, head of the church, firstborn of the dead, and reconciler of all things. All things are

reconciled "in his body of flesh by his death" (Col 1:21), as Jesus makes "peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:20). Moo (2008, 134) points out, "Though created through him and for him, 'all things' no longer bear the relationship to their creator that they were intended to have. They are therefore in need of reconciliation." Paul also emphasizes the vastness of God's mission to reconcile all things in Ephesians 1:10, although he uses the language of: "a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

Summary

Understanding reconciliation is essential for understanding God's mission. Furthermore, understanding reconciliation is essential for understanding Pauline theology. R. P. Martin (1993, 94) puts it best, "Reconciliation provides a suitable umbrella under which the main features of Paul's kerygma and its practical outworking may be set." Throughout these central passages on reconciliation, Paul explains God's mission by pointing his readers to different salvific realities, including justification, forgiveness, peace, and the sacrifice of Jesus. These important salvific realities of reconciliation are also found throughout Ephesians 1–2, even when Paul does not use explicit reconciliation language.

Blessings and God's Mission of Reconciliation

The language of blessing is found throughout Scripture. God pronounces blessings over His creation (Gen 1:22, 28), Abram (Gen 12:2–3), and Israel (Deut 28:1–14). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins each beatitude with blessing (Matt 5:3–12). While God loves to bless, God's blessing comes through relationship. As Osborne (2020, 22) contends, "In the Bible, God is the fountainhead and source of all blessings. But God's act of blessing does not just entail the giving of things; it necessitates a right relationship between the two parties—God and his creation. To be blessed by God is to be in right standing with him." Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Paul emphasizes blessing as an aspect of God's mission of reconciliation.

The first place in Ephesians where we begin to see reconciliation language and similarities with other passages on reconciliation is Ephesians 1:3–14. In the text, Paul blesses God for the spiritual blessings received in Christ, but he explains blessings in

their relationship to God's mission of reconciliation. Ephesians 1:3 reads, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." This opening verse sets the stage for what is to follow by establishing two central truths about blessing and God's mission of reconciliation. First, "God has blessed his people by virtue of their union with Christ" (Arnold 2010, 79). For Paul, spiritual blessings are a reality for those reconciled and joined to Christ. Second, the blessings believers receive through their union with Christ are spiritual in nature. Paul's focus in 1:3–14 are the vast spiritual blessings planned by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Spirit. The heart of these verses is how believers have been blessed as a result of God's mission of reconciliation. The following section will explore three main themes of reconciliation: union with Christ, adoption, and redemption.

Union with Christ

Paul refers to union with Christ as the means by which the reconciled receive and experience every spiritual blessing from the Father. In God's mission of reconciliation, believers are chosen in Christ (1:4), adopted through Jesus Christ (1:5), redeemed in Him (1:7), united in Him (1:10), obtain an inheritance in Him (1:11), and are sealed with the Holy Spirit in Christ (1:13). Throughout this section, Paul uses the phrases "in Christ," "in Him," or their equivalent eleven times. Clearly, in Paul's theology, "the sphere within which the divine blessing is bestowed and received is the Lord Jesus Christ" (Stott 1979, 34). Not only do believers participate in the divine blessing through union with Christ, they also experience communion with God through Christ because of God's reconciling work.

Many commentators have recognized the importance of union with Christ in Ephesians, specifically in 1:3–14. In Paul's theology, "Union with Christ involves the participation of believers in the events of Christ's narrative, including the death and burial, resurrection, ascension, and glorification" (Campbell 2012, 408). Moreover, union with Christ involves a change of location for believers—from alienation to under Christ's lordship—a change of identity—from the old man to a new creation—and incorporation into a "community that is founded, shaped, and directed by Christ" (Campbell 2012, 408–09). Throughout Ephesians 1:3–14, Paul applies the blessings of reconciliation to those united in Christ. This same application is also found in Romans 5, 2 Corinthians 5, and Colossians 1, but the emphasis is greater in Ephesians 1.

Adoption

In *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer (1988, 206; emphasis original) argues that adoption *"is the highest privilege that the gospel offers."* Understanding the weightiness of his claim, Packer (1988, 206–207; emphasis original) explains his reasoning:

> Justification is the *primary* blessing, because it meets our spiritual need . . . Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of *love*, and viewing God as *father*. In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship—he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater.

As Packer reads Paul, adoption is a glorious blessing of God's mission to reconcile sinners. Sinners who are alienated from God, not only find forgiveness and restoration in Christ, they also find acceptance into God's family through adoption.

Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4–5, "In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." Before reconciliation takes place, sinners are spiritually dead, condemned, and following Satan (Eph 2:1–2). But adoption is an important aspect of Paul's soteriology that signifies "the *transfer* of a son (usually an adult) as he is taken out of one family and placed in another with all its attending privileges and responsibilities" (Burke 2006, 40). Therefore, in God's mission of reconciliation, sinners are not only saved *out of* sin, they are saved *into* God's family through adoption.

Redemption

In Israel's exodus out of Egypt, "God [establishes] a paradigm, the pattern, for understanding the salvation of all his people, including Israel and the nations, through Jesus the Messiah" (Morales 2020, 5). God's mission of salvation continues to be described in terms of redemption throughout the rest of the Old Testament and into the New.

In Ephesians 1:7, Paul explains the spiritual blessing of redemption. He writes, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according

to the riches of his grace." Redemption is "release or freedom on payment of a price, deliverance by a costly method" (Douglas 2008, 452). In His mission of salvation, God redeems sinners out of slavery to sin and death through the blood of Jesus. In the New Testament, the ransom paid to deliver sinners out of bondage is the blood of Christ. Cole (2009, 132–33) states, "Jesus' sacrifice satisfies the divine holiness because he offers himself as a lamb without spot or blemish to God in our place. Holiness requires no less." Therefore, redemption is the work of God whereby sinners are forgiven of their sins and delivered out of slavery to sin and death through the blood of Christ.

However, redemption is not the end goal of God's mission of salvation, reconciliation through adoption is (Scott 1992, 174). Reconciliation with God is made possible through redemption, as the alienating sinfulness is removed through forgiveness and sinners are once and for all delivered out of bondage and into freedom (Gal 5:1). Here in Ephesians 1, Paul brings together adoption (1:5) and redemption (1:7) to explain the blessings of God's mission of reconciliation. Similarly, in Colossians 1, Paul writes of redemption (1:14) and God's work of reconciliation (1:20).

Synthesis

How exactly is Ephesians 1:3–14 about reconciliation if Paul never uses explicit reconciliation language? The answer lies in Paul's combining of different theological concepts in order to explain God's mission. A believer's union with Christ, adoption, and redemption are insufficient in themselves to fully explain reconciliation. However, when Paul uses them together, these soteriological concepts form the basis of reconciliation. Sinners who were once alienated from God are redeemed out of slavery to death and adopted into God's family through Christ as their sins are forgiven. Paul does not use *καταλλάσσω* (to reconcile), *ἀποκαταλλάσσω* (to reconcile), *καταλλαγή* (reconciliation) in this passage, and yet, the concept of reconciliation is there. Paul explains God's mission of salvation in terms of reconciliation.

The Trinitarian Nature of Reconciliation

There are different emphases found in treatments of reconciliation. Some highlight the extent of reconciliation. Others focus on the relationship of reconciliation to other soteriological and Christological themes. An often-underappreciated aspect of

reconciliation is its trinitarian nature. Known as "the Trinitarian letter" (Hoehner 2002, 106), Ephesians is the perfect place to examine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit's work in bringing about reconciliation. The clearest example of the trinitarian nature of reconciliation is found in Ephesians 1–2.

The Father

The Father's work in reconciliation is clearly perceived in the opening chapters of Ephesus as Paul intentionally delineates the specific work of each person of the Trinity. While there are numerous references to the Father's involvement in reconciliation in Ephesians, this section will highlight two main sections: Ephesians 1:3–6 and 2:4–7.

In Ephesians 1:3–10, Paul highlights the relational or familial side of reconciliation. God is not only "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," He also adopts sinners "as sons through Christ Jesus" (Eph 1:3, 5). Therefore, "creatively God may be the Father of all humankind . . . but salvifically God is the Father only of those who are in Christ and are his sons and daughters by adoption and grace" (Burke 2006, 89). Those alienated from God are reconciled because the Father "chose" (Eph. 1:4) them before the foundation of the world to "be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:4). God's mission of reconciliation is described by Paul as the purpose, mystery, and plan of the Father to unite all things in heaven and earth in Christ (Eph. 1:5, 9–11), a theme he also emphasizes in Colossians 1.

Paul uses more of a judicial point of view in Ephesians 2:1–10 to describe how sinners are reconciled to God. The Ephesians were dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1, 4), and therefore, estranged from God. But the Father was rich in mercy and "made [them] alive together with Christ" (Eph 2:4–6). By grace, the Ephesians were raised up from their former state and seated "in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:6). In his usage of *in Christ* and *with Christ*, Paul reminds the Ephesians that the Father has not only saved them out of their former state of sin and death, He saved them into union with Christ. Moreover, the Ephesians are the "workmanship" of God, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which the Father prepared beforehand" (Eph 2:10).

The Son

Much of what Paul writes about God's mission of reconciliation in Ephesians relates to the work of the Son. It was the Father's purpose, "which he set forth in Christ as a plan

for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9–10). In Ephesians 1:3–13 and 2:11–17, Paul explains the Son's role in God's mission of reconciliation.

In 1:3–13, there are four main themes that shed light on the importance of the Son in God's mission of reconciliation. First, Paul uses reconciliation language when he emphasizes the Christian's union with Christ. Believers are blessed by the Father with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" *in Christ* (1:3). Christians are adopted as sons *through* Jesus Christ (1:5). The Father blessed the Ephesian Christians *in the Beloved* (1:6). It is *in Him* that redemption takes place through His blood (1:7). God's overarching mission to reconcile all things is set forth *in Christ* (1:9–10). Believers are "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" *in Him* (1:13). Rather than only describing salvation in judicial terms—sin has been removed by the blood of Jesus so that sinners are no longer guilty—Paul connects the atoning work of the Son to the peaceful relationship His work establishes for sinners.

Second, in Ephesians 1:7, Paul explains how the atoning work of the Son brings forgiveness. Paul writes in 1:7, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses." In God's mission of reconciliation, the Son offers His life as an atonement for sin so that through His blood, sins are forgiven and peace between God and humanity is possible. Reconciliation is only possible because of the sacrifice of the Son on behalf of sinners.

Paul also summarizes the ultimate purpose of God's mission in Ephesians 1:7–10 as the uniting of all things in Christ. There is an eschatological dimension to Paul's understanding of reconciliation, whereby, through the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son, God has already started the work of reconciliation, a work that has not yet reached its fulfillment. Lincoln (1990, 33) connects this passage to Colossians 1:20 and argues that Paul is referring to the reconciliation of all things in heaven and earth. He writes, "Both passages appear to presuppose that the cosmos had been plunged into disintegration on account of sin and that it is God's purpose to restore its original harmony in Christ" (1990, 33). One of the main similarities between Ephesians 1:7–10 and Colossians 1:19–20 is Paul's emphasis on the work of Christ.

Finally, Ephesians 2:11–22 provides readers with a fuller understanding of reconciliation by explaining how the Son brought peace to the Gentiles and the Jews that climaxes in the new reconciled body becoming a dwelling place for God. While

humanity's ultimate need is peace with God, biblical reconciliation also involves peace in the restoration of broken human relationships. In verse 12, Paul emphasizes the Gentiles' separation from Christ and alienation from Israel. Therefore, the Gentiles need reconciliation in two directions: vertical and horizontal. Although the Gentiles were far off from God, they were "brought near by the blood of Christ" (2:13). Even more, Christ kills the hostility between the Gentiles and Jews by becoming their peace, reconciling "both to God in one body through the cross" (2:14–17). This new reconciled body made up of Jews and Gentiles is built upon Christ Jesus the cornerstone into a dwelling for the Lord (2:20–22). The work of Jesus Christ on the cross means Jew and Gentile have complete access to God and peace with one another.

The Spirit

While Galatians and Romans contain more comprehensive teaching on the Spirit's part in reconciling believers, Paul makes it clear that there is no reconciliation without the work of the Spirit in Ephesians. Two important passages that help readers recognize the importance of the Spirit in reconciliation are Ephesians 1:13–21 and 2:18–22.

After explaining the role of the Father and Son in reconciling the Ephesians, Paul clarifies what part the Holy Spirit plays. He writes in Ephesians 1:13–14, "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." According to Paul, the Holy Spirit functions as a seal and down payment of a future inheritance for Christians when they are reconciled to God.

When the Ephesians heard and believed the gospel, they were reconciled to God in Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Those who once were "dead in [their] trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:1) and "following the prince of the power of the air" (Eph 2:2) now have peace with God in Christ, and the proof that they belong to God is the Holy Spirit (O'Brien 1999, 120). This idea of the Holy Spirit serving as a seal and down payment of a future inheritance is also found in 2 Corinthians 1:21–22: "And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee." The concept of the Holy Spirit as a seal and guarantee relates to God's mission of reconciliation in two ways. First,

those who once were separated from God because of their sins, now belong to God because they have been redeemed by Christ. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit proves a person has been reconciled to God and now belongs to Him. Second, the idea of a guarantee or down payment connects back to Ephesians 1:5 and Paul's use of the term adoption (υἱοθεσίαν). The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of a future inheritance because believers have been adopted as sons in Christ Jesus. As adopted sons, Christians are heirs. Therefore, the Holy Spirit indwells believers as a seal of their new position as a child of God and a guarantee of their future inheritance as adopted sons.

Although it is easy to overlook, Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in 1:15–21 also grants a glimpse into the work of the Spirit in reconciliation. Paul prays that "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you" (1:17–18). Not only does the Spirit seal believers, the Spirit also grants wisdom and illumination so that believers become increasingly more aware of the salvific work that has taken place in their lives. The great mystery that Paul celebrates throughout the letter of Ephesians is "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:6). It is this mystery that the Spirit continually reveals to believers so that they understand the reconciliation that has taken place through Christ.

In Ephesians 2:18–22, Paul proclaims two truths applicable to believers who have been reconciled to God. First, Christians—both Jews and Gentiles—now have access to the Father. Paul emphasizes the trinitarian nature of reconciliation in 2:18: "For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father." As Stott (1979, 103) writes, "For our access is *to the Father, through him* (the Son who made peace and preached it), and *in* or by *one Spirit*, the Spirit who regenerates, seal and indwells his people, who witnesses with our spirits that we are God's children." This new access to the Father is in the Spirit who indwells reconciled believers.

The other core truth in Ephesians 2:18–22 relates to the Gentiles' new standing in Christ. The Gentiles "are no longer strangers and aliens," but rather "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (2:19). Furthermore, God makes His reconciled people into a holy temple, "a dwelling place for God by the

Spirit" (2:21–22). As God reconciles the Gentiles and Jews to Himself and one another, the Father builds them as stones (1 Pet 2:5) upon the cornerstone, Jesus Christ, into a temple where God dwells by the Spirit. Lincoln (1990, 162) writes, "The church is not only the place of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles, it is also the place where reconciliation between humanity and God is experienced, where harmony between heaven and earth has been restored, and where access to the Father is enjoyed." Hoehner (2002, 107) concludes, "The initiation and continuation of a human being's relationship to God involves all three Persons of the Trinity. Paul speaks of the Father as the one who creates the new person into a holy temple, Christ the Son whose reconciliation is the cornerstone of this new temple, and the Holy Spirit who is the manner by which God dwells in this new structure (2:22)." God's mission of reconciliation succeeds in creating a temple made up of God's people that He indwells in the Spirit.

Summary

In Paul's theology, God's mission of reconciliation must be understood in trinitarian terms. Throughout Ephesians 1–2 Paul uses clear trinitarian language to help the Ephesians understand what God has done to reconcile them to Himself. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work in unison to reconcile sinners which is God's plan for the fullness of time. Ephesians 1–2 is arguably the clearest explanation of how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit reconcile believers.

Reconciliation Between Peoples

Because of sin, broken relationships and estrangement cover the pages of Scripture. While reconciliation between God and humanity takes center stage in the grand narrative of the Bible, there is also a desperate need for reconciliation between individuals and nations. Paul views God's mission of reconciliation in individual and corporate, horizontal and vertical horizons. In Ephesians 2:1–10, Paul celebrates the reconciliation of individual sinners. Even when sinners were alienated from God because of their disobedience and sinfulness, God displays His great mercy by forgiving them of their sins and making them alive together in Christ by grace through faith (Eph 2:1–10). In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul's focus shifts from individuals to a group of people: the Gentiles. God's mission to reconcile encompasses both Gentile and the Jew.

The Gentiles needed peace with God and the Jews. Ephesians 2:11–22 explains how God reconciled the Gentiles to Himself and the Gentiles and Jews into a new body. The mystery of Christ to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to God and one another (Eph 3:4–6) is a central aspect of God's purpose set forth in Christ (Eph 1:9).

The Gentiles Reconciled to God

While both the Jews and Gentiles needed reconciliation with God, Paul emphasizes the serious nature of the Gentiles' spiritual state because they were not God's covenant people. Paul writes, "Remember that you were at that time *separated* from Christ, *alienated* from the commonwealth of Israel and *strangers* to the covenants of promise, having *no hope* and *without God* in the world" (Eph 2:12; emphasis mine). In one verse, Paul paints a dark picture for the Gentiles, revealing the chasm between themselves and God, and their desperate need for reconciliation. The Gentiles were without hope and without God in the world (Eph 2:12).

Although the Gentiles were once "far off" from God, they had been brought near through reconciliation "by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13). The Gentiles who were dead in their sins and without hope are justified by the blood of Christ so that they "are no longer strangers and aliens, but [become] fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19). Schreiner (2001, 223) notes how Paul connects justification and reconciliation as "constituent parts of the Christ event." Through Christ, the Gentiles sins are forgiven and saved into God's family. God's mission of reconciliation changes everything for the Gentiles, especially their identity. But the cross of Christ also brought an end to the hostility between the Jews and Gentiles.

The Gentiles and Jews United into a New Body

Throughout the Bible, the world is regularly divided into two different groups: the Gentile nations and the Jews. There was a mutual animosity between the Gentiles and the Jews (Lincoln 1990, 142). These two groups were different on many levels, however, the good news of God's mission of reconciliation is that in Christ, these two groups become a new people. In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul desires for the Gentiles in Ephesus to understand how their reconciliation with God also impacts their reconciliation with the Jews.

God brings reconciliation to the Gentiles and Jews by killing animosity and making peace (Porter 1993, 698). Paul emphasizes that the new peace between these two groups is entirely the work of God. Because God "is our peace," He is the one who joins the Gentiles and Jews into one body (2:14). While the Mosaic law functioned as a "dividing wall of hostility" that bred animosity between the two groups, on the cross, Jesus tore down the wall by "abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one man in place of the two, so making peace" (2:14–15). Applying Isaiah 57:19 to God's reconciling work in the Gentiles and Jews, Paul proclaims that Jesus came to preach peace to the Gentiles who were far off and to the Jews who were near (2:17). With the dividing wall broken down, "Jews and Gentiles are able to come together in Christ to form a new, third people, all of whom are at peace with God and therefore at peace with one another (Eph 2:15, 17–18)" (Thielman 2005, 402). God's mission of reconciliation not only demonstrates power in taking two formerly hostile peoples and forming them into one body, it also gloriously displays the love God had for all peoples.

In Ephesians 2:19–22, Paul describes the new reconciled people as "a holy temple in the Lord" and "a dwelling place for God." This is similar to the language Peter uses in 1 Peter 2:4–6 to describe how all Christians are living stones "being built up as a spiritual house" upon Christ who is the cornerstone. Paul uses the body and temple metaphors together to emphasize that the Jews and Gentiles have been united into one body of which Christ is the head (Eph 1:22–23), and in Christ, this body becomes a holy temple for the Spirit of God (Eph 2:22). God's aim in reconciling the Gentiles and Jews into one body was to form a people He would dwell in. Paul's use of temple language connects back to the Old Testament temple and God's "glorious presence filling the temple" (Duvall and Hays 2019, 233). Now, through reconciliation, God's glorious presence was not just *among* His people, but *in* His reconciled people who had become a holy temple. In Christ, this new body is the holy temple on earth that points forward to the eschatological fulfillment found in Revelation 21–22 (Beale and Kim 2014, 102).

Conclusion

Few, if any, soteriological concepts encapsulate God's mission of salvation in Scripture as well as reconciliation. In reconciliation, God removes the alienating barrier of sin so

that sinners are brought into peaceful relations through the work of Christ. Throughout the Bible, God reconciles sinners to Himself, brings reconciliation to broken relationships, and works to reconcile all things affected by sin. While God's mission of reconciliation fills the pages of Scripture, among biblical authors, no one writes about reconciliation in God's mission more than the Apostle Paul.

Within Paul's writings, three passages outside of Ephesians are considered to be the core of his theology on reconciliation: Romans 5:1–11, 2 Corinthians 5:11–21, and Colossians 1:20–22. However, Ephesians 1–2 should also be considered as an essential contribution to Paul's theology of reconciliation. Specifically, Paul's focus on God's mission in the opening chapters of Ephesians explains the blessings of God's mission to reconcile, the trinitarian nature of reconciliation, and the reconciliation of individuals and peoples. Despite containing few explicit references to reconciliation, Paul combines various soteriological concepts to emphasize the reconciliation emphasis of God's mission throughout Ephesians 1–2. By examining Ephesians alongside Romans 5, 2 Corinthians 5, and Colossians 1, readers can recognize the wonderful contribution Ephesians 1–2 makes to Pauline theology.

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Creating Paths for Transformational Conversion: The Church Discipleship Matrix

Vol 3:1 2023

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Evangelical churches around the globe face the challenge of overcoming cultural barriers to engage people with the gospel message and guide them toward biblically faithful discipleship. Each church develops a sub-culture of traditions, behaviors, and beliefs that poses challenges to connecting with outsiders who share the same cultural background but have little prior knowledge of Christianity. This cultural disconnect between the sender and recipient of the good news creates an obstacle in fulfilling Christ's call to "make disciples" among all nations and facilitate conversions (Matt 28:18–20). A careful self-assessment by local congregations regarding their approach to disciple-making will aid in closing the gap between people within and outside the church. In this respect, the Church Discipleship Matrix (CDM) offers a tool to evaluate and recontextualize pathways of transformational conversion. Churches can engage their leaders and church members in a creative, communal exercise of self-reflection to discover how contextualization affects their disciple-making ability. The matrix sheds light on the entire process of gospel diffusion, beginning with the transmission of the Christian faith and moving to the translation of ministry (contextualization), the turnaround experience (conversion), the transformation of converts, and the retransmission of the gospel.

The first section introduces the research project that first applied the CDM to analyze three evangelical church plants that succeeded in gospel diffusion despite their secular context in Germany. The qualitative multi-case study serves as the basis for this article and for utilizing the matrix as a diagnostic instrument for local congregations (Liesen 2022). The second section describes the Church Discipleship Matrix with its five main diffusional patterns and assessment grids. Next, a summary of diffusional patterns shared by the German church plants and their positive effects on life-changing conversions may spark new ideas for local retranslations. The final section discloses the

benefits of the Church Discipleship Matrix for Christian leaders and offers instructions on implementing the matrix in a congregational exercise of self-reflection. In the end, the Church Discipleship Matrix can assist churches in determining culture-specific and biblically faithful methods for facilitating conversions in their pursuit of the Great Commission.

The Research Project

The Church Discipleship Matrix served as the analytical framework for a multi-case study of three evangelical churches in Germany that started their ministry between 2010 and 2020 (Liesen 2022). The primary question of what factors contributed to conversion in the diffusion of the Christian message motivated this qualitative study that drew on personal interviews of converts and church leaders as the main data sources. The relevance of the diffusional patterns becomes apparent when considering that church plants are unusual cases due to their high conversion growth despite Germany's adverse, secular context. Moreover, the significant theological and cultural diversity across churches strengthens the credibility of the research findings that emerged from the case studies (Yin 2018, 49–61; Patton 2002, 235).

Hope Center in Berlin (HCB), an independent Pentecostal church led by a second-generation Ghanaian migrant, represents the phenomenon of reverse mission in Europe through mission endeavors originating in the global South. ConnectKirche Erfurt (CKE), which belongs to Germany's largest Pentecostal denomination, is one of many new Pentecostal churches displaying the latest trends in missional engagement. Finally, the Reformed Gospel Church Munich (GCM), which belongs to the Redeemer City to City church planting network (CtC), is an example of influential American mission efforts that operate through globally active church planting organizations. Thus, each church signifies a unique evangelical movement that bears hope for re-evangelizing secular Germany (Liesen 2022, 59–88).

Each case study church pursued the Great Commission in the Federal Republic of Germany, which can be designated as a post-Christian nation. Religious pluralism, a decrease in ethical and religious convictions originating in Christianity, individualism, and secularization make up some of the cultural influences in Germany (Paas 2011, 11). Mainline churches have suffered from a drastic decline in membership for several

decades and expect to lose half of their members by 2060 (Frerk 2022; Bingener 2019). The average growth of membership in evangelical denominations has been minimal. For example, the four major evangelical denominations only grew by about 20,000 members from 2002 to 2012. Philipp Bartholomä (2017, 218–236) describes this as a crisis of mission in present-day Germany.

Consequently, evangelical leaders of German denominations yearn to counter this negative missional trend by initiating a church-planting movement (NC2P 2018). Each church plant in the multi-case study offers insights about spreading the gospel despite a challenging secular context. Intriguingly, the qualitative research revealed that all three churches adhered to an evangelical view of the gospel, conversion, and transformation in discipleship. Salient diffusional patterns emerged that enabled each church to move individuals from first hearing the gospel to fully devoting their lives to Christian discipleship.

The Analytical Grid: The Church Discipleship Matrix

The central purpose of the Church Discipleship Matrix for the German research project was to identify how and why individuals experienced life-changing conversions due to the patterns of gospel diffusion (see fig. 1). A *matrix* displays "something within or from which something else originates, develops, or takes form" (Merriam-Webster n.d.). Thus, the Church Discipleship Matrix traces the progression of conversion that develops within the patterns of gospel diffusion. Correspondingly, the structural framework of the matrix relates the conversion process to the missionary activity of Christian ministries. Gospel diffusion and the response of transformational conversion weave together in a dynamic interaction between churches that spread the gospel and converts who apply the Christian message within their cultural framework. The intertwining arrows in the center of the matrix display this interactive progression in the experience of mission work.

For the analytical purposes of the CDM, *transmission* includes all aspects of communicating the Christian message by missionary entities to the recipient culture, while *retransmission* occurs when converts share their newfound faith locally and cross-culturally. *Translation*, used interchangeably with the term contextualization, refers to the linguistic and conceptual transferal of the Christian faith into a culture. *Turnaround*

serves as a synonym for conversion and signifies the process character of the conversion experience. Christian conversion occurs when a person turns around from sin through repentance to place their faith in Christ for salvation. Evangelicals reflect on the dynamics between a point of decision and turnaround processes in genuine conversions (Smith 2010, 1–16). The biblical data and the empirical case studies confirm that converts often may go through decision-making processes.

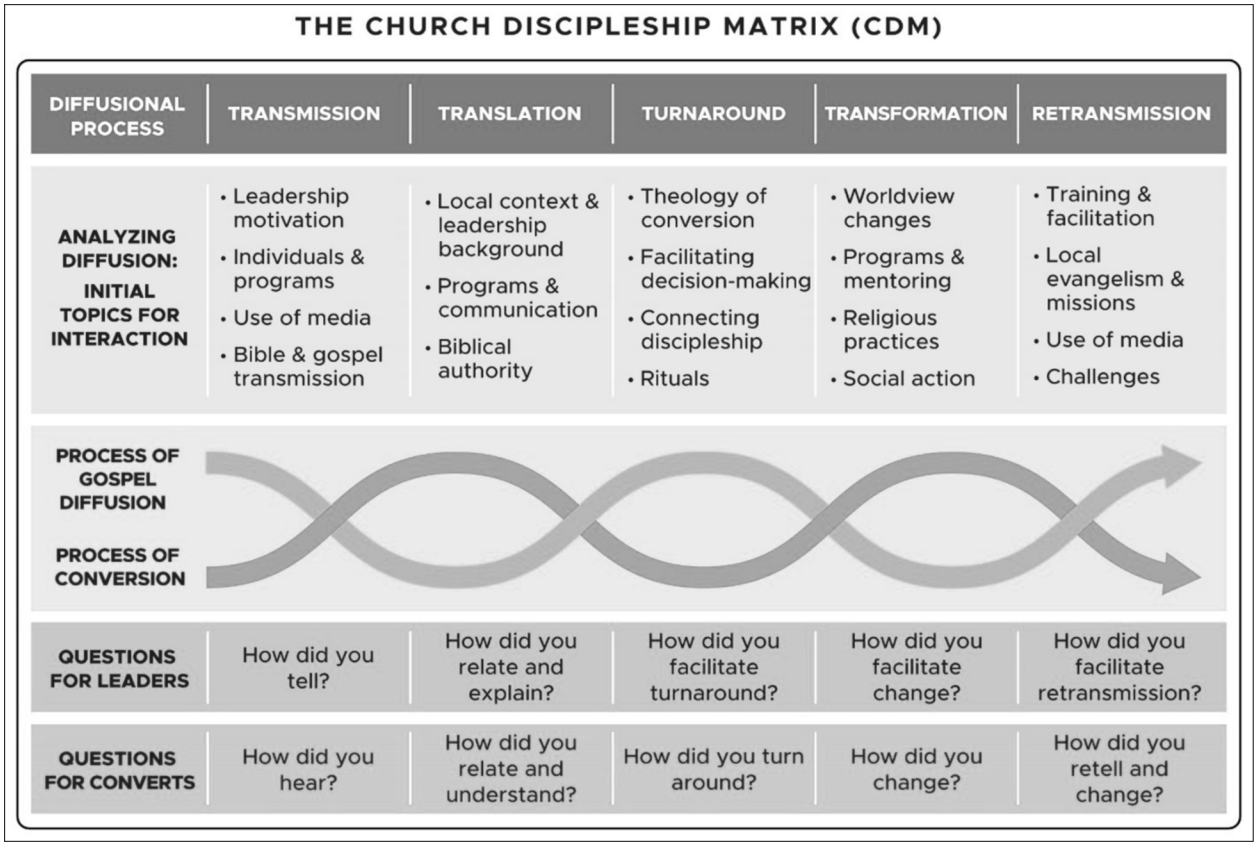

Figure 1. *The Church Discipleship Matrix (Frank Liesen) is called the Diffusional Matrix of Conversion in the original research project.*

Notwithstanding, the Scriptures disclose that regeneration occurs at one point in time, and leaders in the early Christian church expected immediate responses to gospel proclamation (Berkhof 1991, 483–485; Schnabel 2008, 226). *Transformation* denotes the change of individuals and cultures through conversion and applying the Christian faith

to all aspects of the human experience. The term comprises the individual's change, often designated as discipleship, but moves beyond personal transformation to its effects on the socio-economic and political context. Andrew Walls (2002, 2–34) uses the term *diffusion* to describe the transmission and appropriation of the Christian message across cultures in history, while the CDM applies the term to the dynamics of diffusing the gospel from Christian sub-cultures into their local contexts.

The sequential ordering and understanding of transmission, translation, transformation, and retransmission as primary aspects of gospel diffusion originate from lectures in World Christian Studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The matrix adds turnaround as a separate analytical theme of diffusion, thereby disclosing conversion as pivotal in spreading the gospel across cultures. Congruently, Walls's literature discloses conversion as a complementary dynamic to translation in which converts "appropriate (i.e. make their own) the translated Word" toward the culture-specific transformation of themselves and their Christian communities (Burrows 2011, 123). Hence, the CDM incorporates translation and turnaround as vital and integral analytical elements of how churches shape conversion in light of their particular approaches to gospel diffusion and how converts respond with their unique embodiments of faith.

It is noteworthy that the CDM follows a logical sequence but does not presume a fixed chronological progression of either diffusion or conversion. For example, even though the missionary impulse of gospel transmission initiates the diffusional process (Matt 28:18–20), translation may precede transmission and affects all diffusional areas. Retransmission may occur at an early stage of conversion. In comparison, Everett Rogers (2003) developed a similar five-step diffusional model to trace the innovation-decision process, outlining a Knowledge Stage, Persuasion Stage, Decision Stage, Implementation Stage, and Confirmation Stage. On the one hand, the CDM also places the point of decision in the middle of the diffusional process. On the other hand, the Church Discipleship Matrix differentiates from Rogers's model aside from its particular focus on Christian conversion rather than on the general acceptance of innovations. For example, the CDM integrates the confirmation of conversion in the turnaround and transformation stages while placing retransmission as the final phase of diffusion. The intriguing similarities between how people adopt innovations and how individuals respond to the gospel warrant further academic explorations.

Furthermore, the Church Discipleship Matrix features an initial list of research topics and basic questions for the analytical inquiry. The diverse topics for each diffusional phase can guide group discussions and individual interviews with converts and church leaders. Interactions with new believers may reveal unexpected caveats of interest about the local diffusion of the gospel. For example, a surprise in the case study research was the report of converts about the critical role of formal and informal mentors in practical discipleship. In that respect, the interview questions ensure hearing the voices of both church leaders and converts as they contemplate gospel diffusion and conversion from their viewpoint. New believers may confirm, contradict, or add to the explanations of ministry leaders about how and why conversions and transformative changes became possible in their Christian community. Engaging both propagators and recipients of the Christian message in applying the CDM strengthens the soundness of research findings and stimulates the discovery of new pathways of gospel diffusion.

The CDM differentiates from other analytical frameworks of conversion in that it uses the missionary activity of Christian ministries as the primary analytical grid and relates the diffusional process to conversion. This approach of viewing conversion primarily from a church ministry perspective offers significant advantages. First, the CDM allows for a natural integration of translation or contextualization in the analytical scheme with its vital role in how churches shape each aspect of gospel diffusion and conversion. Secondly, the facilitation of the turnaround experience itself through such factors as rituals or decision-making opportunities finds a principal place in the analytical scheme. Thirdly, the CDM highlights retransmission and engaging converts to recommunicate the gospel as indispensable aspects of Great Commission ministries and gospel diffusion across cultures.

Without genuine conversion, the Christian faith may quickly turn into *Christopaganism*, a syncretistic form of religiosity that is impotent to change the worldview of converts (Hiebert 2008, 162). Churches need to constantly review their approach to transmitting the gospel into local contexts, facilitating conversions, and ensuring deep Christian discipleship among converts. The CDM offers churches a practical tool to foster a creative and thorough self-assessment procedure for enabling transformational conversions. Additionally, the following research findings may offer new inspiration for recontextualization as they exhibit how three church plants rigorously pursued disciple-making in secular Germany.

Diffusional Patterns in Three Churches

Five main diffusional patterns shaped the conversion process of individuals and guided them from their initial church contact toward transformational conversions: multi-faceted transmission, caring translation, clear turnaround, deep transformation, and continual retransmission. This section reviews the diffusional patterns that emerged from the research and reflects on implications and potential applications in other ministry settings. Remarkably, several converts in this study shared an atheistic background or a deep-seated disinterest in religion prior to their conversion. Their testimonies reflect on a missionary praxis of churches that were able to invite individuals to respond to the gospel and enter into deep discipleship despite an adverse, secular context. Thus, intriguing insights emerge for evangelical leaders who will use the CDM to recontextualize their ministries and pursue fulfilling the Great Commission in their local communities.

Multi-Faceted Transmission

The church plants engaged pre-converts with the multi-faceted transmission of the Christian message. Corporate programs of communicating the gospel relied heavily on individuals who invited non-believers from within their social networks. Engaging potential converts with the biblical message was a core component of transmission, driven by the missionary zeal of pastoral leaders.

All three church plants employed a variety of corporate programs for the sake of transmission, while worship services were the main entry point for converts to hear the gospel message. Corporate events ranged from small groups that organized unique gatherings to interact with non-Christians (CKE), street evangelism campaigns called Revival Weeks (HCB), to musical performances with Broadway musicians (GCM). Gospel Church Munich and ConnectKirche Erfurt also promoted their events through large-scale advertisement campaigns, leading some converts to attend church services initially. In agreement with Ott and Wilson's assessment of effective church planting, church planters used a broad range of corporate programs to "cast the net widely" for transmitting the gospel while not neglecting to encourage individual transmission (2011, 215). Personal invitations were a critical component of attracting non-believers to church functions. Corporate transmission relied on and supplemented individuals

who testified to their faith within their social context. Thus, mobilizing the church constituency for transmission was essential for convincing secular people to attend church services or participate in Christian activities, thereby facilitating gospel exposure (Bartholomä 2019, 527).

The reports of converts across church plants about unusual or spiritual experiences that contributed to their resolve in pursuing the Christian faith was a surprising discovery. These accounts add to the mystery of conversion and imply that church planting is not reducible to a business-like leadership approach in establishing new organizations (Gooren 2010, 139–141; Paas 2016, 204). The question of why some people respond positively and others negatively to gospel dissemination ultimately lies outside the control of church leaders. Evidently, traction with new "clients" is not solely determined by missionary zeal but also by God's supernatural work of creating spiritual receptivity and an internal call of salvation (Acts 16:14; Berkhof 1991, 454). In the case study churches, Christian leaders counterbalanced their zealous labor at proclaiming the Christian message with a prayerful attitude and reliance on God's mysterious intervention in the lives of individuals (Col 3:3).

Caring Translation

Church leaders related the Christian faith to converts by carefully translating their church programs and communication styles. All converts in this study reported that contextualization had its intended effect of attracting them to their respective churches and making the Christian message understandable in their language and life experience. Pentecostal practices did not thwart the research participants from moving closer toward conversion.

Intriguingly, the dynamics of a loving community played a crucial role alongside focused contextualization efforts in drawing pre-converts into the church and making them "feel at home." Research findings confirm the validity of Bartholomä's plea (2019, 149–150, 230–232) for evangelical churches to engage in self-reflective contextualization in their quest to evangelize secular people. At the same time, the appeal of loving relationships and Christian unity, even within multicultural communities like Hope Center, cannot be underestimated (Dye 2017, 227–232). Converts spoke about the powerful effect of experiencing unconditional love and unity

despite congregational diversity and in contrast to their secular relational network. In harmony with Christ's prayer for the witness of a united church (John 17:21), the local congregations placed a high value on establishing loving communities alongside careful translation.

Moreover, the research findings highlight that contextualizing both language choices and delivery styles in communication was as crucial as adjusting church programs to local conditions. Church leaders found a voice among secular people because they used contemporary terminology and related the Christian message to the everyday experience of their audiences. ConnectKirche Erfurt, for example, conducted extensive surveys to determine how to rephrase Christian terminology for communicating with secular people in Erfurt. Pastor Herla (personal communication, April 2, 2020) explained that he replaced a word like *Reue* (regret) for the biblical term *Buße* (repentance) since the latter term had been trivialized in the German language and lost its meaning. Hesselgrave and Rommen recommend the search for "new supplemental terminology" to ensure a comprehensible gospel presentation (1989, 179). Consequently, Christian leaders face the challenge of choosing and interpreting new terminology sensibly to convey the full meaning of biblical terms to their audiences.

Nevertheless, none of the German pastors saw the need to replace biblical concepts of sin and forgiveness with ambiguous concepts such as social exclusion in their presentation of conversion (Faix 2018). The research findings disclose that the gospel remained translatable with its core theological components of sin and forgiveness, even in a secular context. The study participants responded positively to the gospel's communication with a radical turnaround toward deep transformation (Walls 1996, 27–28; Schnabel 2008, 400; Rom 1:16).

Clear Turnaround

Case study church plants enabled conversions through clear invitations into discipleship. Although church leaders affirmed that conversions could occur as a process rather than a singular decision, they constantly communicated the need to make a clear turnaround from the old life of sin to the new life of following Christ. The practice of frequent calls of decision-making, handled differently by each church,

reminded non-believers to make conversion a personal experience rather than a mere process of social integration (Tidball 1999, 190, 208–209). Apparently, urgent and punctiliar calls for decision-making retain their significance in motivating individuals to have a personal turnaround experience (2 Cor 5:20). This is true even in post-Christian Europe, where, according to the former director of City to City Europe, Al Barth (personal communication, June 29, 2019), individuals often go through slow conversion processes.

Furthermore, each church plant presented the meaning of Christian conversion intelligibly. Pastor Lubemba from Berlin articulated the meaning of conversion most distinctly with the two necessary components of turning away from sin through repentance and turning to God by faith (personal communication, November 19, 2019; Erickson 1989, 933–942). Lupemba explained that conversion is the change "from a self-determined life to a God-determined life, a life that was without repentance, . . . to a life of repentance." Pastor Müller in Munich (personal communication, February 21, 2020) believed a genuine sense of man's sinfulness and deep, personal faith in Christ are indispensable aspects of conversion, rather than a superficial faith in historical facts (Berkhof 1991, 504–505). In Erfurt, co-pastor Blum (personal communication, April 2, 2020) shared that their church plant keeps a low conversion threshold by focusing on personal faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. However, church leaders steer converts to repent from specific sins in their lives at the very moment of their decision to convert. Thus, CKE taught new believers the meaning of repentance in "realistic and concrete terms" by addressing personal sin from the outset of their Christian faith (Stott and Wright 2015, 92). Notably, none of the churches in this case study jeopardized genuine spiritual renewal by omitting a message of "true repentance and conversion" despite their eagerness to see numerical growth. (Paas 2019, 205; Acts 17:30, John 1:12).

Even though converts reported varying degrees of doctrinal knowledge at the time of their conversion, all participants continued their spiritual progression toward discipleship. Clarity about the meaning of repentance from sin and turning toward Christ in faith for salvation laid the groundwork for transformation. Thus, theological clarity on conversion emerged as one crucial aspect of enabling subsequent transformation.

Deep Transformation

Each church guided converts to pursue deep discipleship. Discipling activities occurred at various levels of organizational structure and engagement in social action, while all church plants stressed the importance of biblical instruction in fostering transformation. Simultaneously, spiritual or Pentecostal experiences personalized and intensified transformation even in the reformed, non-charismatic Gospel Church Munich.

The data analysis revealed that biblical formation, rooted in the propositional truth of the Bible, was a critical element in transformational changes and aided new believers in adopting a biblical worldview (Hesselgrave 2018, 240). A profound transition from a secular worldview, indifferent to religion in general (Moon 2019, 119–121), to a biblical worldview was evident among converts. A phenomenon of what Hiebert describes as "deep discipling" toward a cognitive, affective, and evaluative transformation became possible (2008, 319, 312–316). Cognitively, new believers began to accept the Bible as literal truth and absolute authority for moral choices. Anna, a university student in Berlin, determined that the Bible is entirely dependable since "the Word of God remains and is truer than science." Silke at GCM, an optometrist, came to understand the Bible as God's literal Word and concluded that "the Bible is much smarter than we think." The research findings highlight that biblical formation stands at the heart of deep discipleship, especially in the context of liberal tendencies within evangelicalism that question such hallmarks of evangelical faith as the affirmation of biblical authority (Jung 2011, 208–210; 2 Tim 3:16–17).

Correspondingly, the hope of lowering standards of faith so that Christian communities can cross the cultural divide to a secular audience neither harmonizes with the experience of converts in this study nor sociological insights into the competitiveness of evangelical churches (Stolz et al. 2014, 352–354). The biblical conservatism of the German church plants did not negatively impact the participant's path toward transformational conversion. Instead, the centrality of biblical doctrines and values in discipleship across case-study churches indicates that abandoning biblical conservatism may thwart spiritual formation toward greater Christlikeness. Research findings in this study affirm the conviction of evangelicals that the authoritative Scriptures should remain the filter for culture rather than the reverse. Otherwise, cultural values may supersede biblical mandates and engender syncretistic versions of transformation (Eitel 2012, 66, 72–75).

Additionally, the integration into the church community, volunteerism that exposed converts to spiritual growth opportunities, and personal mentoring contributed to ongoing transformational changes. Converts across all three churches emphasized the critical role of formal or informal mentors in their spiritual formation (Tangen 2012, 196–200). The caring attention of mature believers who walk alongside converts in applying biblical values to their life circumstances rather than particular organizational structures became apparent as an indispensable component of deep discipleship (1 Thess 2:7–8).

Continual Retransmission

All three church plants propagated retransmission to converts by communicating the value of evangelistic endeavors and training individuals to share their new faith. In addition, churches offered various activities to enlist and support converts in retransmission, while involvement in foreign missions remained minimal.

Notably, church leaders motivated converts to speak about their faith immediately after their conversion and viewed their enthusiasm and pre-existing friendships with non-believers as invaluable assets in retransmission. Personal invitations to worship services and other church functions accounted for many new visitors to the individual church plants. The implication for outreach-oriented churches is that guiding new believers in evangelism at the beginning rather than the end of progressive transformation is highly preferable (Abraham 2007; Mark 5:19). Pastor Müller, for example, believed that new converts with their inherent enthusiasm and pre-existing relational network in the secular world made them "by far the best evangelists." CKE sought to ignite a passion for evangelism immediately after the converts' decision by asking them to call friends and family members and tell them about their new faith. The pastor explained that this method helped brand-new believers become Christian witnesses in everyday life. Thus, CKE joined the worldwide Pentecostal movement in its ability to mobilize its congregations for evangelism, "including the very newest Christians" (Tennent 2007, 182–183). Ott and Wilson elucidate that recent converts are effective witnesses because of their contextual sensitivity: "They still speak the language and think in terms of the contemporary culture." (2011, 293).

Nonetheless, sharing the gospel message personally posed a challenge for several converts in this study, while those new believers who took part in street evangelism

showed less inhibition to verbal proclamation (Stolz 2014, 220–233). Similarly, converts reported that the ritual act of baptism solidified their Christian profession. This research finding indicates that public confessions of faith may invigorate young believers to share their faith more freely.

Finally, several new believers reported using social media as a primary tool for retransmission. On the one hand, Scott Moreau (2018, 148) highlights the fundamental change in communication in the present time, comparing the significance of cell phones in transmission to the invention of the printing press. On the other hand, David Dunaetz (2019, 138–151) points out hindrances to personal evangelism on social media for the younger generation: The fear of rejection caused by cyberbullying and the *Mum effect*, the avoidance of sharing potentially bad news. Inadvertently, converts in this study followed Dunaetz's advice to focus on relationship building, testify to personal faith practices or experiences, and post invitations to public church services. In this manner, new believers prevented personal ridicule in case their online contacts rejected the gospel as bad news while offering opportunities to hear gospel presentations in less-threatening public settings (Matt 10:16).

Benefits and Applications of the CDM as a Self-Analytical Tool

The Church Discipleship Matrix traces the entire process of gospel diffusion through local churches. Thus, Christian leaders who apply the matrix as a self-evaluation tool can evaluate their approach to contextualizing the Great Commission and enabling transformational conversions. The CDM reveals how the church transmits the Christian faith, translates its ministry for its specific audience, fosters the turnaround experience, facilitates transformational discipleship, and encourages retransmission locally and cross-culturally. By answering how and why new believers experience their conversion, church leaders can discover new pathways for relating the gospel to people within their unique cultural setting.

The diffusional patterns that emerged from the case study research offer intriguing insights about encouraging life-changing conversions. Nonetheless, caution is in place about copying ministry practices too quickly in the hope of reproducing identical results. The multi-case study did not seek to prove or disprove causes for conversion growth. Instead, the qualitative research allowed for a rich description of each unique

case and the common diffusional patterns across all three ministries in Germany. External validity, the generalization of research findings, is problematic since the strength of qualitative case studies lies in providing in-depth descriptions rather than generalizations based on substantial amounts of quantitative data (Yin 2018, 45). Likewise, Paas (2016, 203–204) warns of duplicating church models, seeking to produce equivalent results in different contexts while not taking into account case-specific, non-replicable factors. Consequently, each church leader must determine how far principles and practices are transferable and might have a similar impact within their cultural context. Retranslations will be inevitable but may create new and fertile pathways to evangelical gospel diffusion.

In this respect, the Church Discipleship Matrix can serve as an exploratory tool for recontextualization. One benefit of the CDM is that it integrates translation into the analytical scheme for gospel diffusion and conversion. As a result, ministry leaders become aware of the critical influence of contextualization in shaping transformational conversion. A second benefit of the matrix is that it highlights the pivotal role of the turnaround experience itself. An analysis of how churches present the gospel, provide opportunities for decision-making, and view conversion as a point and process will shed light on whether current practices help or hinder culture-specific, evangelical conversions. Leadership teams may also discuss, for example, their current practices of connecting conversion with discipleship and ponder the role of rituals in this transitional phase.

A third benefit of applying the Church Discipleship Matrix is that pastors can predetermine pathways of transformation and the organizational level suitable for their constituency. The case study churches differentiated significantly in their discipleship structures as they adjusted programs according to the needs and limitations of their target group. Nonetheless, deep discipleship occurred among all converts in this study, illuminating such critical factors as personal mentoring in progressive transformation. As churches analyze their ministries with the CDM, surprising discoveries may be at hand about what assists converts most in their progressive journey toward greater Christlikeness.

A fourth benefit of the CDM is the integration of retransmission as a natural component of analyzing the progression of conversion. The diffusional pattern of

retransmission reminds church leaders of the convert's critical role in drawing outsiders into the church community and toward gospel exposure. Retransmission also conveys the need for churches to incorporate cross-cultural missions as an indispensable and vital component of biblically faithful discipleship.

Finally, the Church Discipleship Matrix invites both church leaders and converts to participate in translation, stimulating what Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989, 174–175) call cross-fertilization in contextualization. The basic questionnaire of the CDM, along with its initial list of research topics, serves as a springboard toward a rich interaction between propagators and recipients of the gospel about shaping diffusion. The dynamics of *cross-fertilization* will benefit churches in diffusing the blessings of unchanging biblical doctrines in culture-specific manifestations of conversions. Andrew Walls calls this interplay between the Scriptures and culture the pilgrim and indigenous principle, of which one cannot have "too much of one or the other" (1996, 54).

David Allen's Natural Planning Model offers a blueprint for employing the Church Discipleship Matrix as a self-analytical tool in local church settings (Allen 2001, 54–82). First, the leadership discusses the original purpose of the church and the role of the Great Commission in the church's call into the world. Secondly, leaders envision what true success would look like in fulfilling the Great Commission within their context. Thirdly, a phase of information gathering will disclose the church's current practice of facilitating gospel diffusion and the conversion process. This third phase applies the Church Discipleship Matrix as a self-analytical framework and facilitates brainstorming sessions in group settings to cultivate cross-fertilization between leaders and converts. Additionally, this step encompasses focused interviews with converts and church leaders about their experience of the five main diffusional patterns. Fourth, a leadership team analyzes the research findings, determines new or adjusted pathways of gospel diffusion, and organizes the results in sub-projects for implementation. Including new believers in establishing culture-specific applications is vital for this analytical phase. Finally, the church determines the next action steps and a timeline for executing any recontextualizations of diffusional patterns to fulfill their context-specific call of disciple-making.

Conclusion

Creating pathways for transformational conversions is critical in establishing Great Commission ministries. Research in three German church plants with high conversion growth revealed five vital patterns of gospel diffusion: multi-faceted transmission, caring translation, clear turnaround, deep transformation, and continual retransmission. Each of these patterns may spark innovative ideas for recontextualizing diffusional patterns in other ministry settings. In this respect, the Church Discipleship Matrix offers a tool for recontextualizing gospel diffusion to encourage culture-specific, transformational conversions. Engaging both leaders and converts in applying the Church Discipleship Matrix in this self-analytical group activity will ensure the discovery of new insights and applications for gospel diffusion. In the end, evangelicals yearn for God's authoritative Word to guide churches and converts toward an ever-growing Christlikeness, flowing into the continual retransmission of the gospel cross-culturally (Eitel 2015; Eph 4:13; Matt 28:18-29).

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Christian Zionism: A Missiological Emergency

Vol 3:1 2023

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Introduction

Like most Americans, I grew up as a loyal supporter of the state of Israel, our closest ally in the Middle East. While serving as an officer in the Air Force, I was assigned to an aircraft modification project for the Israeli Air Force. I recall feeling a sense of awe when I met an Israeli fighter pilot, as I recalled the Israeli Air Force's devastating success during the Six-Day War. After completing my military service, I obtained a degree from Dallas Theological Seminary which teaches dispensational theology. In dispensationalism, Israel figures positively and prominently in God's prophetic program in the end times.

Later, while living in the Arab world, I was repeatedly shocked by the bias of the Arab media against Israel; yet, I was smart enough to try to avoid any discussion of politics and the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Years later I joined the faculty of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, and the first course I was asked to teach was the Old Testament Prophets. It was there that I came face to face with a significant problem. God's promises to Israel fill the prophetic books; yet, since two-thirds of Jordanians are Palestinian in background, most of the Arab Christian students in my class had family members who had suffered at the hands of the Israeli government policies and had to flee from their homes in Israel/Palestine. In America we Christians expect Palestinians to just accept that God gave Israel the land; but, the land that "God gave" included the ancestral lands of my students.

On one occasion, I took a taxi across Amman. The thirty-year-old taxi driver had come from the West Bank a year before. Upon learning that I was from America, his face strained with pain as he asked why Americans were so biased in favor of Israel. He

shared the story of his being detained for months without charges by Israeli authorities. He described how eight of his family and friends were killed and his home destroyed by an Israeli missile. He exclaimed, "We don't hate the Israelis, but we have to defend ourselves and our land."[1]

For many years I was a zealous supporter of Israel and unaware of and unsympathetic to Palestinian perspectives. However, living in the Middle East opened my eyes in new ways. I came to see how our American Christian bias in favor of Israel and against Palestinians was detrimental for everyone. When we arrived at my destination, I asked if I could pray for him. He eagerly accepted and so I began to pray for peace for him, as well as for all Israelis and Palestinians. While praying I was overcome with emotion and began to weep. As I cried, I asked God to bring peace to him and to the land. I paused, regained control of my emotions, and concluded my prayer. As I handed the driver his fare and bid him farewell, he responded, "I know that some Christians are good people."

That brief moment surprised me as I am not an overtly emotional person. I came to realize that I experienced a small degree of Christ's compassion for the suffering Palestinians who are caught in an unceasing cycle of violence, injustice, oppression and despair. Jesus' compassion was not limited to the sufferings of God's chosen people; Jesus does not take sides. He died for and cares for all.

This experience exposed me to how the unmitigated Christian support for Israel is a significant obstacle for Muslims in accepting the gospel. This is because they associate the message of Christ with the West's unreflective support of Israel and its hostility toward Muslims. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not just a political problem. The detrimental impact of this unreflective support and its extension, namely Christian Zionism, has contributed to a missiological emergency.[2] Colin Chapman assesses the dire situation with these words:

> What does this issue mean for the mission of the Church living and proclaiming the message of Christ to people of all faiths and races in the countries of the Middle East? My time in Egypt and Lebanon and my study

[1] Palestinians have occupied the land for centuries; Jewish people view themselves as returning to the land from exile after nearly two millennia. See 1-2, for claims to the land by both sides (2002).
[2] Missiology is the science of mission. Here I refer to the dire situation facing the church in fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8), and the Great Commandment (Matt 22:36-40; Mark 12: 28-31; John 13:34-35).

> of Islam have forced me to recognize the enormous stumbling block created in the minds of Muslims all over the world by Christian support of Zionism and the policies of Israel . . . My questions have to do with human rights, with Judaism and Islam, with the survival of Christianity in the Middle East, and with the mission of the churches in and around the Land" (2000, 149–50).

George Sabra, dean of the Near East School of Theology, criticized Christian Zionists for inciting Muslims to persecute Arab Christians, resulting in a vanishing Christian presence in the Muslim world through emigration. He was particularly troubled by dispensationalism because it creates a theological justification for Christian Zionism. Sabra sarcastically wondered whether, at the present rate of emigration, any Arab Christians would be left in the Holy Land to experience the Rapture (2006). Sabra may not be exaggerating given that the Palestinian Christian population has declined from 20% to less than two percent.

Sadly, Christian Zionism has harmed the church in the Middle East and the church's mission in the Muslim world. Having lived in that context for many years, I have seen the adverse consequences Christian Zionism has had on Arab Christians and Muslims. Listening to the experiences of my Arab Christian and Muslim colleagues and friends forced me to reflect on my own understanding of the Scriptures as well as the theological positions of the Christian Zionists. I came to see how the Christian Zionist understanding of dispensational eschatology was flawed and I would like to propose a corrective; one that is 1) true to Scripture, 2) truly dispensational, and 3) compassionate and just toward the Palestinian Christian and Muslim communities as well as the Israeli people. My purpose is to provide a theological corrective that can help advance the mission of God among Muslims in the Middle East.

Time-Out for Terminology

To facilitate understanding, three key terms need proper definitions: Zionism, Christian Zionism, and dispensationalism.

[3] I am aware of both Jewish and Arab sensitivities to the geographical terms "Israel" and "Palestine." Historically, Palestine was the common Western historical-political term to refer to the land from the 2nd century when the Jews were expelled until 1948. For the subsequent period, Israel/Palestine or Israel and the Occupied Territories are appropriate terms.

Zionism

Zionism refers to Jewish nationalism. It originally referred to the international movement to establish a Jewish homeland, Palestine[3] being the logical place. For most Jews, Zionism has been primarily a secular, nationalist political movement, not a religious one, to protect them from persecution for being Jews.

At its outset the majority of Jewish Zionists were not religiously motivated. David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir were well known for their atheism. As for Theodore Herzl, he was at least a secular Jew that had assimilated in Vienna. Max Gross (retired dean at the National Defense Intelligence College) observed this about Herzl:

> Only in the context of monitoring the Dreyfus (yet another assimilated Jew) affair in Paris [he] came to realize that even in France where the law assured Jews perfect equality as French citizens, traditional European anti-Semitism could not be eliminated. Therefore, there had to be a "Judenstadt." Obviously, this idea struck a spark in the Jewish community worldwide, and momentum among Jewry for such a state developed very rapidly—a place where Jews could practice or not practice Judaism freely without fear of persecution, not because of their religion, but simply because they were Jews (2006).

In fact, Orthodox Judaism has traditionally opposed Zionism:

> From the standpoint of religion, a national movement might even be considered a 'sinful' movement, a move away from religion, forcing Jews to preoccupy themselves with activities that rightly do not belong to religion and lead Jews down a false path. That is approximately the view of the ultra-Orthodox who have always opposed Israel on these grounds—but these are obviously a minority among Jews in general (Gross 2006).

> Some Orthodox Jews regard Zionism as a blasphemous human attempt to gain the land that can only be given by the Messiah when he comes.

Pawson defines Zionism as the "return of the Jews to the land of their ancestors and the re-establishment of the nation-state of Israel, with Jerusalem (Zion) as their capital" (2014). While most people would be sympathetic or supportive of this idea,

what we Christians have been slow to realize is that making a state religious—in this case, Israel with Zionism—marginalizes and discriminates against all those in the country that are not of that religion. This happens in every country that has a specific religious identity (e.g., Pakistan and Saudi Arabia). To preserve the ethnic character of the Jewish state of Israel, the Christians and Muslims in Israel have been marginalized. What many of us do not realize is that creating the State of Israel "required the ethnic cleansing of 700,000 Arab Palestinians (now over 5 million refugees registered with the UNHCR), exiled to neighbouring countries, the seizure of their land, demolition of their homes, the continued denial of their right to return and their basic human rights. Zionism has only been able to maintain its control of Palestine through the brutal military occupation in the West Bank" (Sizer 2008b). The question we all face as Christians is: What should be our proper response to this?

Christian Zionists

I use this term to refer to the Christian proponents of Zionism who for theological reasons are zealous, uncritical supporters of the state of Israel—particularly in regard to its political policies and territorial expansion. By so doing they either knowingly or unknowingly justify or overlook the injustices and oppression suffered by the non-Jewish population. In this Christian Zionists sharply contrast with earlier Restorationists who share their literalist hermeneutic and eschatological expectation of a return of the Jews to the land, but who were largely passive in their political support for this cause (Hornstra 2008, 131).[4]

Due to the Holocaust and centuries of anti-Semitic treatment by Christians in Europe and Jewish displacement from many lands, Christian compassion naturally sympathizes with the desire of Jewish people for a secure homeland. Christian Zionist support was instrumental in helping the state of Israel come into being and continues to advance the Zionist cause without consideration of how Arab Christians or Arab Muslims in Israel have been denied their basic human rights. David Dolan exemplifies

[4] Hornstra sees the move from Restorationism to Christian Zionism as occurring in the 1970s as a result of: (1) a literalist hermeneutic (though not necessarily dispensational as with many Puritans and Pietists); (2) a closer emotional bond between Christians to their Jewish past and reaction against "replacement theology" and (3) the "sacralization" of the modern state into salvation history .
Given the diversity that exists under group labels, another modifier may be needed to differentiate the small minority who consider themselves Christian Zionist, but who are not uncritical supporters of Israel or unconcerned with human rights of Palestinians.

the thinking of the Christian Zionists when he claimed that the natural and terrorist "disasters affecting America over the past decade are divine retribution for her role in pushing the land for peace" process (2005). Similarly, Pat Robertson declared that Ariel Sharon's stroke was God's judgment upon him for withdrawing from the Gaza Strip (Pipes 2007).[5] Such sentiments should trouble all of us who follow Jesus.

Dispensationalism

The distinctive in the eschatology of Christian Zionists is their "literal" (non-allegorical) interpretation[6] of biblical prophecy that envisions a future fulfillment of Old Testament promises to Israel as a nation, including the land promises.[7]

Their dispensational views have raised the ire of those who are sympathetic with the Palestinians' plight. These sympathizers have become ardent critics of dispensationalism (see further Ateek 1989, Sizer, 2004, Wagner, 1995, 2001, and Crump 2021). Many of these critics see the promises of the Abrahamic covenant as already fulfilled in the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated. In this vein, Chapman goes so far to say that the land promises to Israel are now "irrelevant" (2000, 154–59).

Reading the critiques of Christian Zionist interpretations of Scripture made me realize that their version of dispensationalism needs to be rectified if there is to be any justice and peace in Israel/Palestine.[8] Their views have cast a dark cloud over dispensationalism, which in my view is a case of guilt by association. Although

[5] I am aware of both Jewish and Arab sensitivities to the geographical terms "Israel" and "Palestine." Historically, Palestine was the common Western historical-political term to refer to the land from the 2nd century when the Jews were expelled until 1948. For the subsequent period, Israel/Palestine or Israel and the Occupied Territories are appropriate terms.

[6] The principle of literal interpretation argues for the natural, normal or plain interpretation, while allowing for literary hermeneutical devices such as symbolism, figures of speech, and imagery. But as applied to prophecy, it stands in contrast to subjective spiritualizing and allegorical approaches.

[7] Dispensational theological thinking has had powerful impact on Bible readers. Many criticisms of classical dispensationalism have been addressed by "progressive dispensationalists" who are refining how the New Testament relates to, fulfills, and/or complements the Old. Dispensationalists hold that the church does not replace Israel or absorb it (although it does participate in the blessing aspect of the Abrahamic and New covenants). explanation this relationship thus:

> Israel and the church should be seen as different dimensions of redeemed humanity. Israel and the Gentiles refer to the national and ethnic dimensions of humanity. Consequently, there is no contradiction between the idea of a redeemed remnant and the inheritance of a nation in its Land of Promise. It is crucial to understand that promises made to Israel are to be fulfilled by Israel and not in something reconstituted to take its place. To include others in the promise of redemption does not mean that the national promises of Israel have been excluded.

[8] Many criticisms are of "classical" dispensationalism theological developments reflected in "progressive dispensationalism," the form that dominates the current generation of dispensational scholars (see further ; .

Christian Zionists apply a literal hermeneutic to prophetic scriptures, there is no necessary linkage between literal hermeneutics and Christian Zionism—the problem is the unwarranted scriptural interpretations and mistaken political implications. Moreover, I would advise Christians sympathetic to the plight of Palestinians (who are generally non-dispensational or follow non-literal hermeneutics) that attempts to eradicate the ills of Christian Zionism by trying to convert its adherents to a different hermeneutic of prophecy or theological system are unnecessary and highly unlikely to succeed.[9] I will address what I see as the major faults in Christian Zionist theology while preserving a literal hermeneutic that sees a role for a nation of Israel in biblical prophecy.

As stated earlier, this is so important because the one-sided support of Christian Zionists for Israeli interests, territorial expansion and security, to the exclusion of pursuing peace-making, justice, and human rights for Palestinians, presents a grave danger to the church in the Middle East in fulfilling its mission, including the Great Commission (Matt 28: 19-20) and the Great Commandment (Matt 22:36-40). Thus, Sizer has called Christian Zionism an oxymoron (2008b).

Correcting Christian Zionism

Correcting Christian Zionism and developing more balanced theological, political, and missional positions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue is necessary if followers of Christ are to undertake any role in peace-making that seeks security, justice, and human rights for all parties in the conflict. I must limit myself here to the theological dimension. I will demonstrate that adhering to a literal prophetic hermeneutic does not oblige Christians to promote the Zionist cause, or Israel's current political policies at the expense of Palestinians and other Arabs. Rather, the Scriptures direct us to pursue peace, justice and security for all peoples involved. I proffer the following theological points in support of my position.[10]

[9] Intelligent and godly dispensational and covenant theologians have critiqued each other for decades with relatively few changing sides.
[10] A number of these points appear in Harlan 2004 but with many differences in content.

1. **The nature of the Abrahamic Covenant that promised the land to his descendants is both conditional and unconditional.**

Elsewhere I have written:

> The promise of land, seed and blessing to Abraham's descendants is an irrevocable covenant from God; however, experience of the reality of these blessings was conditioned by the faith-obedience of each generation of Israel . . . Adherence to the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant would qualify them to experience the blessings promised by the Abrahamic covenant, while covenant unfaithfulness would result in application of covenant curses (Harlan 2004, 69).

Ronald Allen describes this theological paradox:

> Was there a conditionality to the divine promise? We would like to answer yes and no . . . faith and obedience were requisites for the people to enjoy . . . the land. Therefore, at each point, in each generation, and for each individual, there was the obligation to be in a personal relationship with God through faith and in an ongoing response to God in gratitude, worship, and obedience. So even the "unconditional covenants" had conditions to them . . . these conditions pertain to enjoyment of or participation in the promises and covenants by particular individuals or generations; the unconditional covenants are unconditional in terms of their final fulfillment (1998, 27).

Hence, participation in this covenant blessing is dependent on faith. Since this is not evidenced by the present state of Israel, it cannot lay claim to possession of the land through Abraham. However, the promise remains valid as it awaits fulfillment in the future by some believing generation of Israel.

2. **An appeal to biblical rights to the land requires observance of the biblical principles of righteousness.**

Receiving the land is a gift from God, as he fulfills his promise. Retaining the land requires a faith-inspired obedience to the Mosaic Law. The injunctions against theft,

murder, covetousness, especially in regard to land (e.g., Ahab and Naboth's vineyard) are particularly applicable in today's environment. In addition, abuse or oppression of foreign aliens and sojourners is condemned (Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:34). Non-Jewish people in the land are to be given the same rights and benefits as the Jewish (Num 9:14; 15:16,29; 35:15; Lev 19:10; 23:27; 25:46-50; Deut 24:14, 19-22; 14:29; 26:12; Josh 24:17) (see further Harlan 2004, 69–73; Burge 1993, 55–124). But if inheriting the land demands righteousness and justice, then as Katanacho asserts:

> Any credible argument for the prophetic place of modern Israel should provide theological justification for the moral state of Israel and for the displacement of thousands of Palestinian refugees who lost their homes in 1948 . . . Fifty thousand of them were Christians . . . Why would God take the Palestinian church into exile in order to bring a group of people who don't accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord? (2013, 31).

We can affirm the extraordinary accomplishments of the Jewish Israelis, their need for a homeland, and their claim of international legitimacy. However, we must admit the State of Israel has not and is not fulfilling the obligations she has under the covenant that would validate a *biblical* claim to her present occupation of the land. As dispensationalist Stanley Ellisen observes, "she falls far short of her covenant obligations. To put it bluntly, she has no biblical right to the covenant land . . . The promise of the land is directly tied to the nation's response to Messiah" (1991, 174).

3. The modern state of Israel is not the fulfillment of the promise of Israel's restoration to the land.

This point is a painful one for many Christians. Many view the modern State of Israel as a miracle. Allen declares, "No people group has ever been removed from its land, dispersed among the nations, survived with a sense of self-awareness and identity, and—many hundreds of years later—been regathered to one place, their old place—and has become a nation and state once again. Now, the Christian believer, observing this isolated phenomenon, finds it exceedingly difficult to say this is not of God" (1998, 26). Many Christians interpret this modern miracle as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy regarding Israel's return to the land and conclude that we must support Israel to be on God's side.

I disagree. The specific prophecy that Christian Zionists believe to have been fulfilled is Ezekiel 36:24-27 (NASB):

> For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the lands; and I will bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and bring it about that you walk in My statutes, and are careful and follow My ordinances.

Reading this passage, Christian Zionists assert that God promises to first return Israel to the land in a state of unbelief and their spiritual restoration will follow. However, such an interpretation imposes a chronological order that violates the larger context. All of these divine actions on behalf of Israel occur in concert. The regathering of the people to the land accompanies, and in fact is contingent upon, the national cleansing of 36:24-25: "At the same time as I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause your cities to be inhabited and the ruined places to be rebuilt.'" Ezekiel 36:16-21 reminds Israel that the reason for the exile was their defiling the land by their wicked deeds and idolatry. Tanner explains: "The result of this was the profaning of God's holy name among the nations. Thus, God will need to act to counter what Israel has done to His name. He will do this by ultimately regathering the nation and cleansing them as a Spirit-filled people" (2001, 25.4). The cleansing of Israel depicted in Ezekiel 36 describes the time when she experiences the New Covenant which is the precondition for her regathering and restoration to the Land (36:24, 37:21), for "it is because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that God's people can walk in His ways and obey the Lord" (36:27) (Tanner 2001, 25.5). Otherwise, Israel will be unable to fulfill the biblical requirements of righteousness to qualify them for permanent possession of the Land. Since this did not occur during Israel's return to the Land after the Babylonian exile (or in the establishment of the modern state), the regathering of 36:22-38 must take place in the future—after Israel's repentance for rejecting Jesus as Messiah—when she "mourns over the one she has pierced" (Zech 12:10). Upon this repentance and the consequent second coming of Christ, the believing remnant of the nation will experience the New Covenant—in contrast to the earlier partial fulfillment of New Covenant blessings with individual Jews and Gentiles as members of the Church

(Tanner 2001, 25.5). The vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37), which depicts the resurrection of Israel as a nation, is also linked to the context of Ezekiel 36, and takes place at the Second Coming (not in 1948). This spiritual resurrection of the nation will be accompanied by a literal physical resurrection of Jewish believers throughout the ages, so that they may participate in Christ's millennial kingdom on earth (Ezek. 37; Dan 12:1-3; Heb 11:39-40) (Tanner 2001, 25.7).

Hence, the establishment of the modern state of Israel is not the fulfillment of Ezekiel's "regathering" promises, for the Torah consistently ties return from exile to repentance (Deut 30:1-6; Lev 26:40-45). Consequently, it does not require Christians to render political support to the Zionist state over and against Palestinians and Arabs. In fact, Israel appears to be under Christ's pronouncement of judgment: "Your house is being left to you desolate . . . until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt 23:38-39)?[11] Until her partial hardening is ended (Rom 11:25-26) and Israel repents, she has not entered her privileged position with its covenant promises regarding land possession.

Nevertheless, we can say the Zionist state "is of God" as an affirmation his sovereignty over the events of the world since the late 19th century. In God's sovereignty these events implicitly fit with the dispensational understanding of prophetic events depicted in the books of Daniel and Revelation—whereby a "form of Israel" (the modern secular state or the Jewish people) is present in the land as eschatological events unfold (the rise of anti-Christ, the judgments of the Tribulation, Israel's national repentance and Messiah's delivering her from destruction, etc.) (Tanner 2001, 25.7). Nonetheless, this does not give divine sanction to the authority of the Israeli state to trod upon the human rights of the Palestinians in achieving their aims (nor do we rationalize or approve of unjust acts by Palestinians). This same principle is evident in Acts 2:23 where Christ was "delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God," but Israel is condemned for nailing him to the cross "by the hands of godless men."

[11] Carson states that "house" can refer to Jerusalem, the temple, or Israel and that here "all three are closely allied and rise and fall together" . This would argue against Bjoraker's applying to modern Israel the Deuteronomic principle that made the extent of land possession contingent upon "the faith/obedience level of the people" .

4. The blessings and curses of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3) do not prohibit condemnation of Israel's sin.

Many Christians are Zionists because they desire God's blessing and do not want to risk coming under the curse of those who curse Abraham (Gen 12:3). Therefore, they think it appropriate to overlook the misdeeds of the State of Israel. However, that curse did not stop Jesus from rebuking the Jewish leaders. In fact, in John 8:33-58 Jesus asserted that the Jewish leaders who were physical descendants (σπερμα) of Abraham, were not children (τεκνα) of Abraham—because their lives did not replicate Abraham's faith and works, but rather those of their real spiritual father, the devil. The curse did not stop the Apostle Paul either. Paul reiterated Jesus' theme, "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel, neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants (Rom 9:6b-7a).

The apostle insisted that the ultimate recipient of the promises spoken to Abraham is Jesus the Messiah. "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, 'and to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'and to your seed,' that is, Christ" (Gal 3:16).[12] Therefore, the promised blessings cannot be experienced apart from Christ and his gift of the Spirit: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Sprit, not by the letter" (Rom 2:28-29). Jewish people who reject Jesus as the Christ are not truly Abraham's heirs. It is those from his physical offspring who are in Christ who are heirs of the promises; it is to them that the blessing and cursing promise applies—and there have been numbers of Jewish people through the centuries who have believed in Jesus as Messiah.

The national aspects of the covenant are directed to a believing national remnant of Abraham's physical offspring. It seems logical that if the national leadership's rejection of Jesus as Messiah led to national judgment, then the future fulfillment of promises to national Israel will entail the leadership's acceptance of the Messiahship of Jesus.

Moreover, the Old Testament prophets loudly and continually condemned Israel whenever she departed from biblical standards of righteousness and religion without

[12] As a clarification, all Christian believers are the spiritual seed of Abraham and beneficiaries of God's promise that all the families of the earth shall be blessed in Abraham (Gen 12:3).

fear of invoking this divine curse upon themselves. In fact, the prophets feared God's punishment if they kept silent and did not condemn Israel and warn her of God's judgment if she did not repent. Furthermore, if we define criticism as cursing, as many pro-Israeli Christians appear to do, then Jesus Christ was Himself guilty for his many criticisms and for this particular "sin"—his cursing of the fig tree (Matt 21:19). This has been understood by dispensational interpreters as symbolic of his curse upon the nation of Israel for its spiritual unfruitfulness. It is clear from our Lord's repeated castigation of the Jewish leadership's unrighteous behavior that he was not constrained by a fear of falling under the curse of those who curse Abraham's seed. We too, as children of the light, are to expose deeds of darkness (Eph 5:11) regardless from whom they arise.

5. **Joshua's conquest of Canaan gives no warrant for ethnic cleansing or confiscating land.**

Utterly unlike the current nation of Israel, Joshua's mandate applied to a specific period of history when Israel had re-covenanted with God to keep all of His commandments and statutes; for otherwise God warned, "You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it" (Deut 30:18). Moreover, the pagan Canaanite civilization had reached the nadir of decadence, including child sacrifice and sorcery (Deut 18:9-15). God commissioned Israel to execute his judgment on the Canaanites whose sin had come to "its full measure" (Gen 15:16) (Harlan 2004, 70–71). David Stern, a Messianic Jew, asserts:

> Joshua had a clear and direct commandment from God both to conquer and to kill the inhabitants of the seven Canaanite nations. It was a very specific *ad hoc* commandment, and it did not extend to all living in the Land, only to certain nations that had had 400 years in which to repent of their evil ways (Gen 15). It cannot be stated rationally that the Palestinian Arabs today are in the category of the Canaanites . . . Such an ethnic comparison expresses an unbiblical attitude of racism, nationalism and hate which cannot be disguised by calling it "faithfulness to God's promises." Moreover, the prophetic vision of resettlement of the Land after the exile is not based on violent takeover but on divine intervention (Isaiah 60-61, Ezekiel 36-37) (2000, 47).

6. To assert that "God gave the land to Israel" as scriptural support for Zionism is simplistic and problematic.

What is the precise amount of territory that comprises "The Land"? Genesis 15:18 describes the land as extending from "the river of Egypt" to the Euphrates (which runs from Turkey to Syria to Iraq). But in Deuteronomy 11:24 it runs from the Negev desert to Lebanon and from the Euphrates to the Western (Mediterranean) Sea. This differs from the allotment of land to the tribes in Joshua. The eastern and northern borders in Numbers 34:3-12 differ sharply from those in Genesis and Deuteronomy (Katanacho 2013, 11).

The borders of Israel have always been much less than the varied biblical depictions. Even at Israel's apex under David and Solomon, much of the land in their kingdom was not possessed or occupied, but only put under tribute (1 Kgs 4:21). According to Genesis 15:18 the promised land would include not only present-day Israel and the Occupied territories, but also modern-day Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, most of Syria and part of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, this territory has been perpetually possessed by Abraham's descendants associated with Ishmael. But putting that aside, the current state of Israel occupies far less than it did under Solomon and the biblical promises. So, do Christian Zionists want Israel to conquer its neighboring Arab countries until it possesses all of that land? Do Christian Zionists truly wish to foster more wars over this territory? Instead, we should leave the fulfillment of land promises to God. As Allen Ross observes, "Israel has never possessed this land in its entirety, but she will when Christ returns to reign as Messiah" (1985, 56).

Is it possible that these differing descriptions of the promised land were indicating something beyond physical boundaries of the land? The Palestinian evangelical scholar, Hanna Katanacho, faults various scholarly attempts to account for these differences because they overlook God's intent to redeem the world (2013, 11–15). God promised Abraham that his seed will possess the territory of their enemies, will be as numerous as the stars and the sand and through them all peoples of earth will be blessed (Gen 22:17). Katanacho concludes: "It seems that the land of Abraham is not going to have fixed borders. It will continue to expand as it conquers the gates of the enemies, thus increasing in size both territorially and demographically . . . until it is equal to the whole earth . . . For God's intention was not to set fixed borders, but to unite the ends of the

earth under the Abrahamic banner" (2013, 37). The Psalms express this vision through God's Anointed whose inheritance will be the nations, the "ends of the earth." Other nations become citizens of Zion (Ps 87) in keeping with the ancient Near East's view of empires where identity was not ethnic, but cultural, political and multiethnic and related to the king's attachment to a deity:

The identity of these empires is not controlled by ethnicity, but by a linkage to a deity. Their main organizing principle is not consanguinity but a socio-religious identity. If this vision is also God's vision for the world, then it follows that Israel's identity is not fixed, but should be continually expanding. This conclusion is congruent with the study of Wanza who proposes that some descriptions of the promised land in the Bible are "literary descriptions" . . . a spatial merism that refers to the whole world (Katanacho 2013, 38).

Dispensationalists should consider the possibility that a broader theological meaning may be the intent of these descriptions of the borders of the promised land.

7. To "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Ps 122:6) is not a call to Christian Zionism.

While the English word "peace" can connote the mere absence of hostilities, social disturbance, war or violence, the Hebrew word *shalom* is holistic, encompassing physical health, relational harmony, material prosperity and spiritual blessing. While false prophets promised peace apart from demands for righteousness, true prophets insisted that peace without justice was impossible. "There is no peace for the wicked" (Isa. 48:22). Glenn Schaefer observes, "Judgment on sin, historically and eschatologically, must come prior to peace (1996, 598)."

The injunction to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" has often been co-opted by Christian Zionists to support Israeli military, political dominance, or whatever favors Israel. However, Ellisen notes that this Psalm's emphasis is on the "house of the Lord" and the peace that comes through a right relationship with God (1991, 185). Furthermore, we must recognize dispensational differences in redemptive history. In David's day, the prayer for the peace of Jerusalem was based on her being the center of God's redemptive activity. However, in the present age, it is the church, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22-24), that occupies this position, until Jerusalem becomes the seat of Messiah's government in the millennium (Maalouf 1998).

Hence, Christians should focus their efforts on proclaiming the gospel of peace and manifesting its power to reconcile Jews and Palestinians rather than promoting political policies of a secular state fixed on territorial expansion, social and ethnic oppression, and deprivation of human rights that feed Palestinian militant extremism and terrorism. The long-term results of continuing on the present course will not be security for Israel, but an unending cycle of violence and despair. Reconciliation—to God and to enemies—not Christian Zionism, is the best strategy for peace and security for all parties.

Conclusion

Christian Zionist support for Israeli interests, territorial expansion, and security has severely damaged efforts at peace-making, justice, and human rights for Palestinians, closing the hearts of Muslims to messengers of the gospel. This presents a crisis to the body of Christ in fulfilling its mission.

Critics of Christian Zionism have laid the blame for this crisis at the feet of dispensational theology. While most Christian Zionists have dispensational theological understandings, what is characteristic of Christian Zionists is their literal interpretation of prophecy in regard to national Israel, a hermeneutic that is shared by non-dispensational Christian Zionists. However, I have argued that this hermeneutical principle does not logically lend support for Christian Zionism. Specifically, this article challenged seven biblical/theological supports for Christian Zionism.

1. The Abrahamic Covenant that promised the land to his descendants is both conditional and unconditional. But the conditional aspect of the promise requires a future believing generation of Israel before it can be fulfilled.

2. An appeal to biblical rights to the land requires observance of the biblical principles of righteousness. Since modern Israel does not meet this demand, she has no basis to for making a biblical claim to the land.

3. The modern state of Israel is not the prophetic fulfillment of the promise of Israel's restoration to the land. Old Testament regathering promises are contingent upon national repentance—a condition the modern Israel has not fulfilled. However, Jewish presence in the land does fit with a dispensational expectation that a form of Israel be present in the land prior to the Great Tribulation leading to its repentance.

4. The blessings and curses of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3) do not prohibit condemnation of Israel's sin.

5. Joshua's conquest of Canaan gives no warrant for ethnic cleansing or confiscating land. Scripture does not justify Christian Zionist support for Israel's expansionist policies and oppression of the Palestinians.

6. To assert that "God gave the land to Israel" as scriptural support for Zionism is simplistic and problematic.

7. To "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" is not a call to Christian Zionism. Israel's present existence in the land does not have the same biblical authority and status as it did under the old covenant.

Nevertheless, adherents to a literal hermeneutic may affirm their hope that God is not finished with His chosen people—he will, in his own time, fulfill his promises and prophetic program to bless all peoples of the earth.

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How Does Social Identity Research Inform Evangelical Missiology?

Vol 3:1 2023

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Discrimination, prejudice, and ethnocentrism are values generally denounced by Western societies (Prati, Crisp, and Rubini 2021). From a missiological point of view, tribalism and nationalism have long been seen as barriers to the spread of the gospel (Glasser et al. 2003a). Yet these sorts of phenomena have regularly appeared in Christian communities throughout the church's history (e.g., Acts 6:1, 15:1-2). Conflicts between groups occur when status differences appear unjust (Bettencourt et al. 2001), both among believers and nonbelievers. Within the field of social psychology (the study of how a person's thoughts, feelings, and behavior affect the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of others), social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Hogg 2006). has been very successful in describing these phenomena, predicting when they occur, and testing ways to attenuate them.

Social Identity Theory

From a psychological point of view (in contrast to a legal point of view), one's identity is a theory of self (Stets and Burke 2000). My identity is a collection of beliefs that I have about who I am and what I do. Social identity theory (Hogg 2006; Tajfel and Turner 1986) posits that in addition to a *personal* identity (beliefs about one's personality, abilities, values, and whatever else makes a person distinct from others), individuals also have a social identity, defined by the groups of which they are members.

My personal identity describes how I am different from others. It includes my personality traits, my abilities (however extensive or limited they may be), the experiences that have shaped me, my values, and the personal relationships that I have with others (Hogg 2006; D. Abrams et al. 2005). My personal identity is continually

varying, depending on whom I am with and the aspects of self that are salient. When I am with my wife, I think of myself one way; when I am teaching in a classroom, I see myself in another; when I am at an academic conference, I see myself in yet another way.

In contrast, my social identity reveals how I am similar to others. My social identity consists of beliefs associated with the groups (or social categories) of which I am a member. In broad terms, one's social identity is a set of categorizations that clarifies and defines one's place in society (Hogg and Terry 2001). When I think of myself as a member of a group, I tend to focus on the attributes and behaviors shared by members of that group. These groups may be very large (defined by my sex, race, age, or nationality) or they may be slightly narrower (defined by my occupation, education, or licensing). These groups also may be defined by limited or local memberships (my local church, the department in which I work, my small group Bible study). Focusing on my membership in various groups helps me see what my role in society is and how I expect to be viewed by others. By behaving like other members of the group, I affirm the value of the group and my place in it.

From a Christian point of view, the most important aspect of one's social identity is one's membership in the body of Christ, the universal church (Rom. 12:4-5, I Cor. 12:12-13). Like my personal identity, my social identity is constantly shifting depending on what group membership is salient. If my age or occupation is salient (as may be the case when I meet with a group of students), I will tend to act like an older professor. If my relationship with Christ is salient, I will tend to act in a Christ-like way. This implies that by keeping my identity in Christ salient, at the forefront of my thoughts, I will be more likely to behave in a God-honoring way.

The Concept of Groups

In social identity theory, groups are viewed as cognitive phenomena (in contrast to legal, administrative, or physical phenomena). If a person views himself or herself as part of a group, the group is real (Hogg 2006); this group membership will influence his or her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Generally, a group requires at least three people viewing themselves as having shared characteristics that distinguish them from people not in the group. Three people are necessary for a group in social identity theory

because a member of the group needs to observe at least two other group members in order to construe the group's behavioral norms.

As a group grows in importance in an individual's life, it becomes part of the identity of the individual. The observed group norms become internalized and inform the person of how they should behave and interact with others (Turner 1982; Hogg 2006; Terry and Hogg 1996), as well as what they should believe and value. Since people may be members of many groups, the group membership which is most salient at a given time will have the greatest influence. Some group members are chronically present in one's mind, either because of strong internalization of values (such as comes from times of daily prayer and Bible study and from regular fellowship with other believers) or because there are constant reminders in one's environment of group membership (such as regular consumption of media that emphasizes specific types of identity). Other group memberships are only salient and influence our behavior occasionally. For example, the only time a person may feel American could be when traveling overseas.

Social Categorization and Prototypicality

As we interact with other individuals, we place them into categories that are similar to the categories in which we place ourselves: race, ethnicity, sex, age, economic status, political orientation, organizational affiliations, religions, and many others, consisting of groups both large and small. For each group, we develop a mental concept of what a typical member is like, known as a prototype (Hogg 2001, 2006). If I hear that a person is a Democrat and know very little else about this person, I will assign him or her attributes similar to the prototype of Democrats that I have in my mind. If I hear that a person is a Republican, I will use a different prototype. Moreover, the prototypes that I use for various groups differ from the prototypes that others use. Prototypes are based on people's evaluations and interpretations of their experiences, and observations, which are highly dependent on personality, beliefs, culture, and even genetics (Hogg 2006; Zuckerman 2005; Dunaetz 2019a). Moreover, we are biased so as to emphasize the traits which favor our groups and distinguish other groups from our own (D. R. Forsyth 2008; Crisp and Hewstone 2006; Prati, Crisp, and Rubini 2021).

In small groups, all members can be observed to infer the group's behavioral norms. However, in larger groups, group norms are inferred from the most salient or important

members. When people go to a church's website to find out more about the church, they often go to the page on church leadership. This helps them understand the nature of the church by providing them with information to form a group prototype. Are they happy, casual people who look like me? Are they serious defenders of the faith who graduated from conservative seminaries? Are they well-educated scholars who will provide me with intellectual stimulation? Are they filled with emotion that will stir me during a worship service? Are they foreigners from a culture that I know little about? Different prototypes will appeal to different people, depending on their own personal identity (their traits, values, experiences, etc.) and the social identity that they already have from other groups to which they belong.

No matter what size the group, the role that the leader plays is essential for the direction and future of the group. So, especially in young groups, the leader defines the group prototype. During times of leadership transition, groups look for leaders who fit the already established prototypes. The more a leader conforms to the prototype of the ideal or typical member, the more the members will be committed to the group. Moreover, the prototypicality of a leader has a stronger effect on group cohesion and commitment than does personal attraction to the leader (Hogg 1993; D Abrams et al. 2000). For example, people may flock to a church with a flamboyant, entertaining, narcissistic pastor, but their commitment to the church will be lower than if the pastor is humbler and a better prototype of what it means to follow Christ (Dunaetz, Cullum, and Barron 2018). Similarly, even if a potential leader has very strong leadership qualities (e.g., those found inBass 1990; Northouse 2013), group members will not desire to follow the leader if he or she does not conform to their prototype of the group (Hogg 2006; Hais, Hogg, and Duck 1997).

Motivations for Joining Groups

Social identity is the part of one's identity that comes from the groups to which one belongs. For some groups, we have little or no choice about our membership. These groups are low in *permeability* and our membership in them does not change throughout our lives (Hogg 2006; Bettencourt et al. 2001). However, our thoughts and evaluations of these groups evolve according to our experiences, as well as our thoughts and evaluations of low permeability groups which we cannot join. For groups that are high

in permeability, not only may our thoughts and evaluations change, but also, we may either join or leave such groups. Social identity research has identified three motivations that influence our thoughts, evaluations, and especially our choice for joining groups. This is especially relevant for church planting missionaries because their primary goal consists of presenting the gospel in a way that motivates people to put their faith in Christ and actively join his body as manifested as a local community of believers.

Increasing Self-Esteem

Perhaps the greatest factor that influences whether we join a group is its effect on our self-esteem. If being a member of a group would raise our self-esteem and makes us feel better about ourselves and what we are doing with our lives, we are likely to want to join that group if we believe that it is possible. We will be more likely to value membership in that group and pay the necessary costs (involving our time, our resources, and our own interests which may need to be subordinated to the group's interests). However, if membership in a group would make us feel bad about ourselves because we would feel ashamed or less honorable, we are not likely to seek membership in that group. Two ways that groups influence our self-esteem are through inclusion (Baumeister and Leary 1995; M. R. Leary et al. 1995) and status (D Abrams and Hogg 1988).

Inclusion, being socially accepted by others, is a fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary 1995). "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18, NIV). In the sociometer model of self-esteem, (M R Leary and Baumeister 2000; M. R. Leary et al. 1995) self-esteem functions as a monitor of social inclusion: When we feel socially included, our self-esteem rises; when we feel excluded, our self-esteem falls. This model has been empirically validated and at least partially explains why exclusion and rejection by others hurt so much, as well as why people try so hard to be accepted by others. One of the most attractive features of the Christian community is that it emphasizes loving one another. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35, NIV). The degree to which members of a Christian community live up to this standard will likely influence the effectiveness of their efforts in evangelism. People will see a community that loves one another and will want to be included in it.

Status, the belief held by others that one is competent in socially valued ways, is also another source of self-esteem (Berger and Webster 2006; Driskell and Mullen 1990). By being a member of a group, individuals, to some degree, are infused with the status of that group and feel better about themselves if they believe that membership in this group increases their status in the eyes of others and they feel worse about themselves if membership in the group causes status to go down in the eyes of others (D Abrams and Hogg 1988). From a church planting perspective, this phenomenon is extremely important. It is a major factor determining who will consider becoming a Christ-follower. Those whose self-esteem would rise by being a member of the church will be much more open to exploring the claims of Christ than those who would feel ashamed to be associated with the church. Since many young churches are similar to the church in Corinth where "not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth" (I Cor. 1:26, NIV), it is difficult for such churches to attract members who are more financially stable, have greater leadership potential, and have the social connections needed to be positively viewed by the community powerholders. This difficulty is one of the most important for church planters to navigate while remaining focused on Christ.

Reducing Uncertainty

A second reason that people seek membership in groups is to know who they are and how they should behave (Hogg 2006). Life is filled with a virtually infinite number of questions. Group membership answers these questions by providing prototypes describing what people do and should do. If I am part of a group, I can observe group norms and know how others habitually behave. This enables me to avoid dangerous behaviors and situations that could cost me dearly and to plan my activities to maximize the benefits that I receive.

The more people are uncertain about their identity and their self-concept, the more they will strive to be part of a group that will reduce their uncertainty (Hogg 2000). This explains one reason why youth ministry can be so effective: Adolescents are seeking to discover and develop their identity and are willing to experiment with various social identities to find what they believe is appropriate (Kidwell et al. 1995; Erikson and Erikson 1998. Groups with clear, prescriptive prototypes and a strong sense of distinctiveness might be most attractive to those who are the most uncertain. This may

include churches with a clear, strong commitment to biblical values, but it may also include churches with an authoritarian, cult-like leadership structure (Hogg 2006).

Optimal Distinctiveness

A third motive for joining groups is optimal distinctiveness (Brewer 1991; Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer 2010). As humans who want both to belong and to be unique, we try to balance these competing desires into an optimal balance that makes us valuable to others, enables us to have close friends whom we can count on, and permits us to make autonomous, authentic decisions to ensure our well-being (D. R. Forsyth 2010; Hogg 2006; Deci and Ryan 2008). This optimal distinctiveness is closely related to Paul's concept of the Body of Christ, "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its parts form one body, so it is with Christ" (I Cor 12:12, NIV). Being a part of the body of Christ and using one's gifts to benefit others enables the believer to achieve optimal distinctiveness. Finding utility, developing close relations, and having the ability to make one's own choices are often reasons cited for wanting to follow Christ and join a church.

Missiological Applications

Social identity theory is descriptive, not prescriptive. It describes how group membership influences a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Not only does my personal identity (my personality, abilities, values, and all that makes me unique) inform what I should think and do, but my social identity (my beliefs about myself based on groups that help define me) does as well. Several important missiological implications and applications can be drawn from social identity theory.

Group Permeability

One of the goals of church planting and other missionary undertakings is to have people join a local community to grow in their Christian commitment and to serve together. Group permeability (Bettencourt et al. 2001; Tajfel and Turner 2004) is a measure of how possible it is for a member of one group to join another group. If the perceived barriers are too high (e.g., people must be morally perfect to become a Christian or join the church), people will not even consider the possibility of joining. If the barriers are

too low (e.g., everyone who desires can join the church), the distinctiveness of the group will be lost and it will blend into the surrounding culture.

Several factors determine a group's perceived permeability (Armenta et al. 2017). Sometimes there is a perceived fundamental incompatibility of group memberships. If one considers oneself to be Muslim or Jewish, becoming a Christian might be considered inconceivable. In such cases, a group of Christ-followers may choose to identify as something other than Christians if the word presents a barrier to others, preventing them from becoming part of the believing community.

Other times there are personal constraints that prevent a person from becoming part of the a. If a group is perceived to be uniquely comprised of people from one race, who speak a specific language, or have a specific accent, then outsiders who are different might not feel that they could ever belong to the group. For Christians, it is important to emphasize that these characteristics are neither important from God's perspective nor the group's, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 NIV).

Perceived values can also make a group appear to be impermeable. Sometimes Christian values are attractive to outsiders. Love, joy, and peace are valued in many cultures and may make a church attractive. However, patience and self-control (continuing with examples pulled from the Fruit of the Spirit, Gal. 5:22-23) may be less valued. Similarly, the sanctity of life, sexual restraint, and a strong work ethic may be viewed negatively by some. In such cases, churches need to not only proclaim their values but should also provide a strong defense of them in order to be attractive to those outside. Sometimes, churches may be associated with specific political parties or specific types of authoritarianism. This may make it easier to attract people from some groups, but it may present an insurmountable barrier for members of other groups. Churches, even young churches, need to clearly define who they are trying to reach so that they can structure themselves to be permeable to members of their target audience.

Yet another source of impermeability is related to the social status associated with a group (Armenta et al. 2017). If the social status of the members of a group seems impossible to achieve (a status beyond that to which a person aspires), then that group

may be considered impermeable. If members of a church seem to be of a much higher social class than someone observing it, this person would likely consider the church as impermeable. However, in missions contexts, this is rarely the case. It is more likely that the first members of a church will be of low social status rather than high social status (cf. I Cor. 2:26; Fraser 2016). "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Mark 2:17, NIV).

Group Status

Humans are generally motivated to be socially competent and valuable, making a contribution to the well-being of others and developing mutually beneficial relationships (Ryan and Deci 2000; Gen. 2:18; Eccl. 4:9-12; Deci and Ryan 2008). Their social value often influences their self-esteem, a feeling that can be said to crudely measure one's perceived social integration (M. R. Leary et al. 1995; M R Leary and Baumeister 2000). From a social identity perspective, people will seek to join groups that will raise their self-esteem and avoid groups that would lower their self-esteem. This phenomenon has some very important implications for evangelism and church planting.

In a perfect world, new believers in Christ would quickly develop into mature, responsible, and competent members of Christ's body, working together to successfully better the world through the efficient and effective use of their gifts and abilities. The changes brought about by their faith in Christ would be clearly visible to those who observe them, communicating that becoming a Christian is an excellent way of developing one's full potential. However, this is often not the case. Sometimes, young churches resemble the church of Corinth, "You are still worldly; For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?" (I Cor. 3:3, NIV).

To some degree, this type of church is to be expected in church planting. Struggling with sin after one's conversion seems to be the normal Christian experience (Rom. 7:14-25, I John 1:8-10). Churches often claim to be a "hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints." The Parable of the Weeds (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) indicates that separating the good seed from the weeds will occur at the final judgment; "Let both grow together until the harvest" (Matt. 13:30 NIV). However, from a social identity

perspective, this can create a barrier to following Christ, especially for people who view their social status as above that of those who attend a church. Following Christ and joining a church would be a step down socially, presenting a stumbling block to those considering the gospel. This may be one reason that it is difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt. 19:24).

Research in social identity has discovered several processes by which this phenomenon can be mitigated. We will examine basking in reflected glory, social creativity, and leadership.

Basking in Reflected Glory. Also known as BIRGing, basking in reflected glory occurs when people associate themselves with others who are successful or have a higher status (Cialdini et al. 1976; Dijkstra et al. 2010) and thus feel more successful themselves. First observed in the higher likelihood of college students wearing their school colors after their football team's victory than after their defeat, BIRGing occurs in churches when celebrity Christians (ranging from pop culture icons to missionaries who have made great sacrifices for the sake of the gospel) are upheld as examples. Such people help define for the observers what it means to be a Christ-follower. Although there may be more semi-homeless people struggling with addictions in the church than such stars, promoting examples of successful people as the prototype of what it means to follow Christ makes a church more attractive to those considering it. A similar, and potentially more effective strategy would promote Jesus himself as the prototype. This is one of the reasons that worship that clearly points to the Lord and his greatness can effectively attract people to a church and the gospel (Morgenthaler 1999).

Social Creativity. One strategy for feeling better about a group is to change the standards for value and status. If the dominant culture values material wealth and fame, a group for whom wealth and fame are unlikely may seek to change the standard of what defines success (Tajfel and Turner 1986; van Bezouw, van Der Toorn, and Becker 2021; Bettencourt et al. 2001). This is an especially important strategy for churches. Serving and loving others is at the center of Jesus' teaching on interpersonal relations (e.g., Mk 9:33-35, Jn 13:34). Such behaviors should be the source of status and value within the Christian community. "The greatest among you will be your servant" (Mt 23:11). Helping a young church adopt such a social norm will not always go smoothly, but it needs to be communicated clearly and continually so as to become the norm for members' behavior. Such a standard is very different from what many people have

grown up with, but with the help of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:15-21), it becomes doable. Moreover, it is not rare for people outside of the church to value love for and service to others, thus making the church more attractive and credible. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (Jn 13:35).

Leadership. Another way that church planters can make a church more attractive to outsiders is to ensure that the leadership within the church is respectable. The leaders "must be above reproach . . . and also have a good reputation with outsiders" (I Tim. 3:2-7 NIV). The prototype of the church member, the mental concept describing the typical group member, is not simply an average of the traits of all the group members. Rather, it is especially determined by the group's leaders (Hais, Hogg, and Duck 1997; Hogg 2001). Those who lead the church, those who are the most visible, generally have more of an impact on outsiders than the typical church member. By choosing and appointing leaders who are viewed as credible and trustworthy (that is, above reproach), the low social status of church members may be less of a threat to the self-esteem of people considering joining the church (Dunaetz 2015, 2019b). Unfortunately, this is not always possible and missionaries may need to provide leadership to a young church for longer than they had foreseen until appropriate leaders emerge. This was apparently the case for Paul and Titus at the young church in Crete, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5).

Dangerous Social Identity Phenomena

Several negative social identity phenomena occur quite regularly when demographic identities (such as race, ethnicity, and gender) and political identities are emphasized. *Ingroup favoritism* occurs when people consciously or unconsciously choose to favor members of their own group over members of other groups (Balliet, Wu, and De Dreu 2014; Greenwald and Pettigrew 2014; Crisp and Hewstone 2006). Prioritizing the needs of our ingroup can be appropriate when being a Christ-follower is central to our identity, "Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10 NIV) or when we have responsibilities within our families, "Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (I Tim. 5:8). However, favoritism based on other characteristics is unacceptable, "If you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers" (James 2:9).

Outgroup derogation is another social identity phenomenon that occurs regularly when left unchecked. When members of a group feel threatened or uncertain, they often disparage, criticize, or condemn members of their outgroup in order to feel better about themselves (Branscombe and Wann 1994). Although this can create solidarity within one's ingroup, it builds a wall between the outgroup and ingroup, even if outgroup members are considering joining the ingroup. For example, if non-Christians hear Christians disparaging their political party, the non-Christians are more likely to reject the gospel because they feel condemned for a political alignment that they view as good. Similarly, if group membership is made salient within a church (e.g., ethnicity), members of one group within a church may derogate outgroup members if they feel threatened, leading to divisions and damaged relationships.

Another dangerous social identity phenomenon is *outgroup homogeneity*. Whereas people tend to see members of their ingroup as holding diverse opinions, values, and beliefs, they tend to see outgroup members as all the same, often choosing the most extreme cases as the prototypical member of the outgroup. For example, a person might see members of their political outgroup as all holding the values of one of the outgroup party's most obnoxious politicians. Similarly, a non-Christian may believe all churches hold values like Westboro Baptist Church or have pastors who act like their least favorite televangelist.

Preventing Negative Social Identity Phenomena in Christian Organizations. Christ has called us to live in peace together (Col. 3:15, Rom. 12:18), focused on him. We live in a time where there is great emphasis placed on group identity, increasing the likelihood that some of these negative phenomena occur in our churches or ministries. From a social identity perspective, there are several strategies that can be used to reduce the likelihood of racism, nationalism, or ethnocentrism occurring and preventing us from experiencing unity in Christ and the reconciliation we are called to experience (2 Cor. 5:18-21, Col. 1:20).

Focusing on Our Identity in Christ. A major theme of the New Testament is the transformation that occurs when we place our faith in Christ (John 3:1-21). Making this transformation and new identity central to our thinking is especially important when considering modern ills associated with identity. Social identity theory predicts that we are most likely to be influenced by aspects of our identity that are salient and accessible in our mind (Hogg 2006); this points to the importance of making our identity in Christ

central to our thinking. Moreover, in Paul's discourse on reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:11-21), the Christian's change of identity is crucial to his argument, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor. 5: 16-17 NIV). This transformation brought about by faith in Christ is so fundamentally associated with our identity that Peter says, "You are a chosen race (γένος), a royal priesthood, a holy nation (ἔθνος), a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Pet. 2:9 NEV).

This reconciliation with God can lead to reconciliation with others because we are called to live in the light that he has provided. Because "God is love" (I Jn 4:8), love is to characterize everything that we do (Jn 13:34-35, I Cor. 13:1-13, I Cor. 16:14, Col. 3:14, I Jn 4:7). This prepares us to be reconciled with those who desire it, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph. 4:32, NIV). Moreover, love means that when injustices exist, as they often do in organizations in which we serve (and even in those that we create (Dunaetz 2020), we must work to right the wrongs and make things fair, just as the Apostles did in Acts 6 when the Greek-speaking widows were being ignored.

Humility. An especially important trait to develop in order to prevent negative social identity phenomena such as ingroup favoritism (e.g., ethnocentrism) and outgroup derogation (e.g., racism) is humility, which can be contrasted to entitlement, grandiosity, and narcissism (Dunaetz, Jung, and Lambert 2018; Dunaetz, Cullum, and Barron 2018; Campbell et al. 2011; Ashton, Lee, and De Vries 2014). Humility (and its correlate of serving others) is central to Christian ethics (Mt. 23:11, Mk 10:44-45, Jn. 13:12-14, James 4:6-10). With a spirit of humility, one is more likely to accept group differences, understand the weaknesses and limitations of one's own social group, reject injustices that favor one social group over another, and care about people who are not part of one's social group.

Multiple Social Categorization. People who view themselves as members of several social categories that do not completely overlap (e.g., organizational, educational, interest-focused, political, service-focused, ethnic, or racial), in contrast to members who view themselves of only one social category (e.g., national or racial), have a higher level of *social identity complexity* (Roccas and Brewer 2002). Research in social identity

theory has also found that such people are less likely to be intolerant and closed-minded, and they are less likely to act against the interests of those who might not be a member of one of their own social groups ((Roccas and Brewer 2002; Prati, Crisp, and Rubini 2021; Bettencourt et al. 2001). By using multiple categories to understand people, they form more nuanced views of individuals and understand the limitations that each category provides for understanding others.

For churches and other Christian organizations, this means that it is important to not let the organization become associated with only one social category, such as race or ethnicity in a multicultural society. When Christianity is associated with a specific category, deviant beliefs (e.g., White Christian nationalism) can develop that are quite contrary to the gospel. To prevent the confusion of social categories (e.g., White, Christian, and American), churches and other Christian organizations, even if they are relatively homogeneous demographically, should include members of other social groups in their public meetings, leadership, and publicity. This may not prevent their opponents from accusing them of intolerance, but it will reduce the likelihood of intolerance arising within the Christian organization.

Conclusion

By considering people's feelings about various social groups, specifically their desire to feel good about who they are, social identity theory has identified various phenomena that may be useful or detrimental in missions work. By creating a positive and desirable identity associated with the churches we plant, lead, or serve, we can make the gospel more attractive to outsiders. However, social identity phenomena can also create effects that are contrary to the gospel, producing conflict rather than reconciliation. By emphasizing our identity in Christ which should make us focus on loving and serving others in humility, along with emphasizing that following Christ is for all peoples, we can more effectively and persuasively proclaim the gospel, glorifying God "who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18).

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The Role of Theological Institutions in Missionary Training

Vol 3:1 2023

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Introduction

In 2011, the World Council of Churches launched a large, global survey on theological education that lasted nearly two years. Over 1,650 theological educators and church leaders responded to the survey. One of the key findings—based on 86 percent of survey respondents—was that "theological education is seen as 'most important' for world Christianity and the mission of the church" ("Global Survey on Theological Education" 2013, 8). But extensive research among long-term, North American missionaries shows that theological institutions are one of the least effective means of missionary training. Why would one group view theological education as "most important" for the mission of the church while theological institutes are providing inadequate training? This article explores this question and the role of theological institutions in training missionaries for cross-cultural missions.

The Research

In the spring of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, extensive research was carried out with over seventy-five long-term, North American missionaries in Asia on their training and equipping for missions.[1] At the time, they were serving (or had served) in at least thirteen countries, represented over twenty-five sending agencies, and averaged eighteen years of service. They were also well-educated. Over half held master's degrees, thirty of which were from seminaries and theological institutions. Five of them held doctorates, and several others were currently pursuing doctorates.

[1] See Lin, Arthur. 2021. "Reflections of North Americans on Their Training and Equipping for Cross-Cultural Missions in Asia." Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia International University. All data, findings, and quotations in this article come from that study.

After having served on the field for many years, these seasoned individuals had a unique vantage point from which to evaluate the training they had received for missionary service.

The missionaries who participated in the research (hereafter missionaries or participants) were given ample space to share their perceptions on formal and theological training. They were asked about specific courses that were valuable to them, what advice they might give to prospective missionaries, and in general, how to get the best training and equipping for missions. In total, fifty-nine of the seventy-five participants commented on missionary training in theological institutions.

Among these participants, 68 percent shared positive comments and 44 percent shared negative comments. Some shared both positive and negative comments. In one question, they were asked to rank or assess four prefield training options regarding their perceived value. These options included a one-year apprenticeship under a missionary on the field; a six-month community-based, cross-cultural training program overseas; a professional degree that could be used for tent-making in a creative-access country; and a master's degree at a seminary in missions, missiology, or intercultural studies. The master's degree in missions was ranked last, well below the professional degree, which came in third. Despite the low overall ranking of the degree, however, some participants perceived it differently. Five of them ranked it as their first choice for prefield training, calling it "super," "wonderful," or "ideal." Analyzing both positive and negative comments revealed insights, strengths, weaknesses, and considerations regarding the role of theological institutions in missionary training.

The Positive

When evaluating the value of theological education in missions, it is natural to think of its plain and straightforward meaning—namely, growing in biblical and theological knowledge. This is indeed what many participants spoke of regarding a seminary or master's degree. It provides a "good foundation," a "really strong base," and a "grounding." It also helps in developing a "biblical worldview." Participants placed great importance on such knowledge for missionaries. In fact, an analysis of what they considered "important" in missionary training showed biblical and/or theological knowledge to be at the top. Theological institutions were viewed as places to grow in

these areas. In addition to specialized biblical/theological knowledge gained at such schools, they also spoke of other types of growth in one's thinking and understanding that can occur. These included being broadened in one's thinking, learning how to interact with ideas, gaining perspective on issues, thinking through situations one would face on the field, and learning how to critique existing paradigms. In sum, cognitive growth and understanding at formal institutions occurred alongside gaining biblical and theological knowledge.

Many participants noted specific classes that were valuable to them. One participant mentioned that a cultural anthropology class "completely renovated the way I look at Cambodians and their culture." Another noted how church history and historical theology courses helped him to see Christianity from a non-North American perspective. A third said that a seminary course covering animism was helpful in her context where folk religion and Islam are intertwined. Other courses that participants found valuable included cross-cultural communication, systemic theology, church planting, and second language acquisition.

One way in which theological education was particularly helpful to the participants was in the area of contextualization. On the field, these missionaries were sometimes confronted by contextualized forms of Christian practice that were unusual or surprising. For one participant, this led to considerable conflict among missionaries on how far they should go in contextualizing the gospel among Muslims. But this participant felt equipped to deal with these types of issues because of the time spent in seminary thinking and talking through them. Another participant faced similar issues among Hindus in India. Through his theological studies, he was able to make sense of the issues and reach the conclusion that contextualization had gone too far.

Theological, biblical, and intellectual growth were not the only benefits of attending a theological institution. Numerous participants noted the spiritual and character growth that occurred. Character and spiritual growth was in fact the second most commonly cited advantage. Several participants noted general or specific ways they had grown personally or spiritually. These included deepening in faith, growing more confident, discerning one's calling, and learning to appreciate grace. But graduates of such schools were not the only ones to share positive comments. One participant shared

an outsider's view, a personal reflection on how he had observed spiritual vitality among students:

> Around year two or three on the field, we were in an isolated Muslim context in Asia. There was a short-term team who we hosted, some seminarians from the U.S., and these were the first people I'd ever met who had actually been to seminary before. The culture towards formal theological training that I had experienced up to that point in my Christian formation was actually a negative attitude towards formal theological education, and I was always very suspicious of them. Anyway, they came for two or three weeks and we were out on the border near Pakistan together on a trip and were just sharing with people as we could and praying, and I just saw a deep love for the Lord and a commitment to the gospel in them. That was the beginning of my changing my mind about the value and effectiveness of theological education. I just thought to myself, If training produces this kind of depth in the character of a person, I want that.

In addition to knowledge, understanding, and spiritual and character growth, participants noted a third benefit of theological institutions. This was the impact of their professors on their lives. In fact, in terms of equipping impact, professors were mentioned more than any other role—including pastors, team leaders, peer missionaries, parents, and supervisors. The influence of professors was both inside and outside the classroom. They helped the participants gain direction or influenced them to serve where they were serving. They hosted small groups or discipleship groups in which the participants were involved. They met with the participants outside of class. Some had become lifelong mentors or provided ongoing encouragement by responding to participants' newsletters on the field. This relational dynamic, which usually was limited to school enrollment but sometimes ongoing, was also a strong but intangible benefit of their theological education.

The Negative

Forty-four percent of participants made negative comments about theological education, formal training, or seminaries and Bible colleges. The biggest and most

frequent criticism of theological education was that it does not adequately prepare graduates for cross-cultural ministry. Participants spoke of this in several ways. One said, "This past year, I have been taking some leveling courses at the master's level to qualify for a DMin program . . . I would say it has been a mixed bag. I've enjoyed them because I like learning, but I have not sensed a real application with them, just to be honest." Another said, "I did four years of Bible college before I got really involved in cross-cultural work, and I don't think that was very helpful at all." A third stated, "Beyond learning how to preach, I didn't find it very practical." A fourth remarked, "In terms of cross-cultural work, we don't look back at seminary as being that helpful, especially if people are going to be working in primarily a non-Christian environment."

Comments from the missionaries led to the conclusion that theological institutions do not adequately prepare missionaries for life and ministry in a cross-cultural environment; they do not help students develop the skills that are innate in missionary life and work. These skills are needed in several general areas. One is related to language and culture and includes knowledge of other cultures and the ability to communicate cross-culturally. One participant plainly stated, "Seminary cannot teach you language or the cultural environment." Another said that he had learned far more from his cross-cultural relationships with a Liberian, a Chinese, and several Koreans than he did from his cross-cultural courses in seminary. While a participant did say that a course in language acquisition methods had been helpful, most participants felt that preparation in the area of language and culture was inadequate.

Related to the cultural dimension, many participants said that their theological institutions were too American or Western. They noted that the theology, perspectives, and orientation of their schools were more oriented to a Western environment rather than to the environment in which they were going to serve. Their courses touched very little upon the culture, worldviews, or religions of those in their future fields. One participant said:

> My master's degree has been good, but again, it's sometimes hard to convince American teachers and students in America that the American church isn't the only church that is out there, so those classes are sometimes frustrating from my point of view. I wish there was more inclusion of the global church in an American educational setting.

Several participants noted that their formal theological training had failed to prepare them for the realities of spiritual warfare and demon possession. They used words like "totally ignorant" or "totally unprepared." One humorously recounted:

> I remember one instance . . . after I'd been to seminary and gotten . . . two master's degrees and had done field orientation training . . . I went to this guy's house. His son was acting real strange and bizarre, and long story short, the dad said, "Hey, my son's possessed by a demon. Can you help?" I remember thinking in that moment, "I didn't take this class in seminary," haha.

In general, participants found that theological institutions inadequately prepared them for cross-cultural ministry. One said, "I see so many people that have graduated with Bible college degrees and the only thing they can do is be a pastor." Another said, "The seminary degree is going to leave out the most essential components . . . [someone] without a notion of how to apply any of it in this context . . . I worry and fear that the seminaries leave out the things that matter most." Theological institutions did not help them develop the necessary skills in church planting, cross-cultural evangelism, working with other missionaries, and Bible translation. Other skills innate to missionary life and ministry could be added as well, including raising financial support, dealing with culture shock, leading teams, leading a larger ministry field or region, relating to the home constituency, dealing with disappointment, and relating well to people of other cultures. Beyond these essentials, missionary best practices and effectiveness on the field were also largely overlooked.

Considerations

Based on feedback from the research participants, three main considerations determined the value of theological education for missionary training. The first was the missionary's role. Theological education was perceived as more valuable for missionaries involved in theological education as a ministry. This is especially true for those who plan to serve in a Bible college or seminary overseas. For them, they need to be grounded in biblical and systemic theology and become aware of theological issues that might arise on the field. In a theological institution in their home context, they would be able to observe and learn from experienced professors before launching out

overseas. One participant noted the value of becoming a grader for one of his professors. This allowed him to spend more time getting to know his professor, something that he found valuable now that he serves in a theological institution in Southeast Asia. While Western institutions are unlikely to equip missionaries for a specific language or culture, Larry Caldwell's (2010) article "How Asian Is Asian Theological Education?" suggests that Westerners would not feel out of place in schools in Asia—and likely other regions of the world as well.

A second consideration regarding the value of theological education is where the missionary plans to serve. The primary considerations here are the openness of the country to missionaries, the degree to which the country is reached, and the presence of an existing church. Participants largely agreed that theological education would be of lesser value in a closed or creative-access country than in an open one. They noted that in a closed country, the missionary would unlikely be able to work in a theological institution or to openly teach biblical and theological courses. They also noted that having a theological degree on one's academic record might raise suspicion in the eyes of the foreign government. Theological education is also perceived as less important in unreached areas where disciple-making movement (DMM) methodology is being employed, since such methods discourage foreign missionaries from teaching national believers (Adams and Adams 2021; Coles 2021).

In contrast, missionaries located in open countries like Japan and Thailand perceived greater value in theological education. They noted the importance of a missionary's qualifications in the eyes of local church leaders. These leaders would likely place higher trust and recognition on the missionary if they were from a reputable seminary or held a theological degree. This could lead to opportunities to preach in their churches or take leadership positions—to have greater influence. For missionaries who will be equipping or serving the national church, a theological degree could be valuable.

The third consideration regarding the value of theological education was the time commitment and cost. Participants said that formal theological training in the U.S. would have delayed their getting to the field or would not have been a worthwhile time investment. Others strongly advised against "racking up" or "piling up" debt. Some, however, said that if the time and money were available, it could be worthwhile.

Participants shared other considerations regarding the value of theological education, such as the temptation to intellectual pride or the propensity to tell others what to do on the field. But the openness of the country, the missionary's role, and the time and financial cost of theological education were the most frequently mentioned considerations by participants.

Comparison to Existing Literature

Taking into consideration all of the participants' comments on missionary training in theological institutions, the evidence suggests that biblical and theological education is strong, spiritual and character development is good, and ministry skills training is weak. How does this line up with what others have written about theological institutions and their role in training for missions?

Though an exhaustive survey of the literature on the topic is not feasible, it would seem that few question the biblical and theological input that students get at theological institutions, at least at conservative evangelical schools. This would be different if schools were perceived as liberal or if they no longer held to some central tenants of the faith, such as the divinity of Christ or the inerrancy of Scripture. Some have been critical of theological institutions for teaching books *about* the Bible but not the Bible itself, for ineffective teaching methods, and for not having a proper missionary undergirding of theology in general (Witmer 1962). But in the area of missionary preparation and training, few have criticized theological institutions for the biblical or theological knowledge gained.

In the area of character development, however, some disagree that it can be acquired in theological institutions. Lewis and Brynjolfson wrote, "The formation of character and attitude traits is a task difficult to achieve in the context of the formal classroom" (2006, loc. 1052). In their book *Missionary Training: Principles and Possibilities*, Evelyn and Richard Hibbert noted, "[T]he pressure felt by most colleges to become more academic and to focus on intellectual development comes at the expense of the development of spirituality, character, and practical ministry skills" (2016, loc. 1919). Darrell Whiteman remarked:

> Although Bible schools and seminaries can train people for biblical and theological knowledge in a formal classroom, they may not be the best

> place to train for other dimensions. Character formation occurs best in a non-formal or informal community context of people living together as they prepare for their cross-cultural ministry (2008, 11).

Based on these comments, it is apparent that some hold a divergent perspective on the potential for character development in theological institutions than the long-term missionaries interviewed in the research. While this is an area of further exploration, there are some possible explanations regarding the differences. One is that theological institutions are places of definite but *limited* character development. Another is that character development occurs more in those who are younger and less mature. A third explanation is that schools differ in their emphasis on character and spiritual development.

In the area of ministry and skills training, however, it would seem that many agree that seminaries and Bible colleges provide inadequate training. While some of the following quotes are dated, they still match the recent feedback of the research participants. Robert Ferris, a long-term theological educator in both the Philippines and the U.S., stated, "New missionary training institutions are needed specifically because missionary candidates are not well served by training available in present theological schools" (1991, 235). David Harley, former general director of OMF and principal at All Nations College in the UK, added, "It became evident that candidates from Bible colleges and seminaries [in India] also needed missionary training if they were to become effective church planters in cross-cultural situations" (1995, 15). Jonathan Lewis and Robert Brynjolfson were both former directors of the International Missionary Training Network. In 2006, they coauthored a book on missionary training that was published by the World Evangelical Alliance's Mission Commission. In it, they remarked, "The formal classroom experience, which traditionally has been emphasized, seems but a small part of the equipping process" (2006, loc. 2643). Darrell Whiteman, who taught at Asbury Theological Seminary and once served as editor of the *International Bulletin for Missionary Research*, wrote, "There is certainly a need for this kind of high-level missiological training that leads to significant reflection and scholarship. But we need to close the gap between the generalized formal training done at seminaries and Bible colleges by academic missiologists and the specific training needed to prepare people for effective cross-cultural mission" (2008, 6–7). Evelyn and Richard Hibbert, authors of *Training Missionaries: Principles and Possibilities*, added,

"Missionary trainers who want to implement a training approach similar to the Journey Training face two key challenges. The first is to overcome the assumption that only a two to three-year Bible college program adequately prepares people for missionary service" (2016, loc. 3428). The Hibberts also noted a study out of their native Australia,

> The failure of much theological education to develop students holistically as servants of God was also evident in a recent, wide-ranging study of theological education in Australia. It revealed a "disconnect" between theological education and the life and ministry of graduates from Bible and theological colleges in Australia. Students reported little personal change over the course of their college education, and the changes they did report were primarily intellectual. More than a tenth of final-year students felt that their college experience reflected an "over-intellectual approach to theology" and a "lack of practical connection to life or ministry, with virtually no connection with the secular world which is a large part of the context of lived Christianity." (Hibbert and Hibbert 2016, locs. 3618–3622)

If theological institutions are inadequately preparing students for cross-cultural ministry, this is problematic for two related reasons. One is that such institutions advertise themselves as training centers for missions and ministry. Biola writes that their MA in Intercultural Studies is "designed to prepare students for a variety of careers in cross-cultural and multicultural work environments and ministries" ("M.A. in Intercultural Studies"). Fuller claims that their MA in Intercultural studies is "ideal for those wanting advanced training for careers in mission including church planting, urban ministry, and work with the poor, children at risk, and marginalized populations in any society" ("MA in Intercultural Studies"). Gordon-Conwell states, "You'll receive specialized training as you prepare for and engage in Kingdom work" ("MAIS: Master of Arts — Intercultural Studies"). Dallas Theological Seminary invites prospective students to "see the many ways students are prepared for a lifetime of fruitful ministry" ("Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies"). Trinity Evangelical Divinity School declares students will "develop the knowledge and skills to serve in cross-cultural settings with the MA/ICS" ("Find Your Program: MA in Intercultural Studies"). They also assert, "If you are or are looking to become a missionary, this program will deepen your biblical understanding, strengthen your intercultural ministry skills and elevate your intercultural communication skills" ("Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies").

Related to this is the fact that prospective missionaries attend such institutions with the expectation that they will be equipped for missions. As Robert Ferris wrote, "In Western countries, people who want to become missionaries usually look for training on their own. They attend a Bible college or seminary and take a missions programme [major]" (1995, 125). If these students knew up front that such institutions were *not* going to prepare them for life and ministry on the field, it seems probable that they would choose a different training path. This could, of course, still include taking select courses in a theological institution. In this regard, one research participant summarized the above points well: "Generally speaking, seminary is not all that helpful in preparing for cross-cultural service in most countries in the world. I think the time could be used more wisely unless they need some character building in a Christian institution." This is a very different message from that which is found on the websites of many theological institutions.

The Historical Role of Theological Institutions in Missionary Training

This article has argued, through field research and existing literature, that theological institutions are helpful but inadequate in preparing missionaries for cross-cultural life and ministry. Evelyn and Richard Hibbert wrote:

> There have been many calls *over the past century* for a more holistic approach to biblical and theological education that integrates character and spiritual formation and the development of practical ministry skills with a deep understanding of the Bible, but unfortunately these calls have rarely been acted on" (2016, loc. 3610, emphasis added).

There is evidence of this problem that goes back at least to a 1934 article in the *International Review of Missions* titled "Missions in the Theological Seminaries of the United States." In the article, William Hill wrote, "Seminary students, recent graduates and ministers of long-standing service, when interviewed, expressed disappointment at the lack of missionary preparation offered them during their seminary days" (Hill 1934, 261–62).

If the problem has existed for so long and calls for change have been "rarely been acted on," it would seem that awareness is not the problem. Lewis and Brynjolfson (2006) argue: "[R]egretfully many of us have concluded that most formal education institutions in both the Global North and South are the least willing to change, to examine their training assumptions, or to learn from others" (2006, loc. 160). The question is then, why *don't* Bible colleges and seminaries modify their programs and incorporate more practical training that serves the needs of cross-cultural missionaries?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, several specialized training institutes were established to train Christians for ministry and missions. These included Boston Missionary Training Institute (now Gordon College), the (Nyack) Missionary Training College (now Alliance University), and the Baptist Missionary Training School in Chicago (now closed). A number of these institutes were established to train women who were not allowed to enroll in seminaries at the time. These specialized institutes sought to provide accessible and practical training for missionaries and others planning to serve in various Christian ministries. As such, they kept tuition free or low, held low entrance requirements, and sought to equip their students with practical ministry skills. Evelyn and Richard Hibbert described them in this way:

> These institutions and colleges were not trying to be academic. Instead, driven by love for God and a keen sense of the world's need for the gospel, they focused on preparing men and women to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. This freed them to be able to address the issues of character, spiritual formation, and practical ministry skills that are vital to missionary preparation (2016, loc. 1817).

While several specialized missionary training programs currently exist in North America (MTI, CIT, Radius International, Equip, etc.), schools similar to these historic training institutes are rare. What happened to them, and why don't they exist today? Numerous factors are involved in their closure or transformation into colleges, but many of these factors can be distilled down to money, lack of demand, and leadership. Specifically,

- Institutes began expanding their curriculum to attract other types of students and lost their original purpose;

- Women were increasingly accepted into other colleges and seminaries, and their training schools closed;
- Academic standards increased along with entrance requirements;
- Students were increasingly drawn to schools where they could get a degree;
- Fewer students sought missionary training following the decline in missions interest in the latter years of the Student Volunteer Movement;
- The Great Depression and World War II impacted the schools financially;
- Second and third generation school leaders lost the original vision of the schools;
- Local churches began to offer in-house training;
- Institutes were influenced by large donations that resulted in a school's relocation or expansion;
- There were demographic shifts from farm to city (Brereton 1981; Lewis and Brynjolfson 2006; Ringenberg 2006).

Academic standards have only increased since the days that these practical training schools disappeared. In 1947, the Accrediting Association of Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges was founded. It included the "collective adoption of curricular norms and conformity to external quality standards associated with postsecondary education" (Enlow 2015, para. 3). Some schools, like Prairie Bible Institute in Canada (now Prairie College), initially resisted such outside academic influences and sought to maintain their purpose. L. E. Maxwell, who presided over the school for over five decades, once stated:

> We are not personally concerned about becoming uniform with others, or in becoming accredited. God has given us a special method of Bible study second to none, and we are content to do what God wants us to do without having to adjust to that which others feel led to do . . . We are convinced that many of the present trends will ultimately take these very Bible institutes into modernism (quoted in Ringenberg 2006, 167).

But twelve years after Maxwell's retirement, Prairie applied for accreditation and was accepted as a full member of the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) in 1997 ("Institution Profile: Prairie College").

This is not to suggest that accreditation is the problem. Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), wrote, "Accreditation is a form of self-regulation—professionals reviewing professionals and academics reviewing academics" (Eaton 2012, 8). The issue for missionary training in theological schools is not the existence of standards, but rather *who* sets the standards and the values and philosophy of education they represent. The problem is that accrediting bodies of Bible colleges and seminaries are made up of *educators*, not missionaries. While the standards may increase educational value, they do not necessarily increase missionary training value. After shedding light on three assumptions that undergird the traditional approach to education, Robert Ferris wrote, "I would submit that none of these assumptions is germane to missionary training" (1991, 237).

In light of this reality, both Ferris (1991) and Evelyn and Richard Hibbert (2016) have proposed an accrediting body established by stakeholders in missionary training. The Hibberts, perhaps extending Ferris' suggestion twenty-five years earlier, wrote:

> Our recommendation would be that mission agencies band together to form a missions training accrediting body that would approve certain programs for missionary training and encourage others to meet their criteria. This would help distinguish programs that provide excellent missionary training according to specific missions criteria determined by stakeholders (2016, loc. 3607).

To date, this has not been carried out. It would, however, seem a worthy pursuit for associations such as The International Missionary Training Network (IMTN) or others who have a vested interest in missionary training.

The way forward is unlikely to be reform in theological institutions. While the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) is spearheading change in theological institutions and accrediting bodies, it is doubtful that the specialized training that missionaries need will be offered at theological institutions in the foreseeable future. Because of this, prospective missionaries would do well to seek

out more experiential, relationship-based training that is backed by more biblical and empirical evidence (Lin 2023).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated, through research and literature, that theological institutions are inadequately preparing missionaries for cross-cultural missions. Positively, these institutions do help prospective missionaries acquire biblical and theological knowledge and broaden their thinking in general ways. They also help to develop their character and spiritual lives, although some have questioned the degree to which they accomplish this. This overall inadequacy to prepare missionaries was shown to be problematic regarding the marketing of theological institutions and in the expectations of prospective missionaries who enroll in such institutions. The historical role of Bible colleges and training institutes in missionary training and the changes over time was then surveyed. Finally, accreditation was discussed along with the suggestion that missionary training stakeholders develop their own accrediting body. The hope is that prospective missionaries gain the best possible training in order to be faithful, fruitful, and effective cross-cultural servants to the glory of God.

Arthur Lin *(PhD) has served for much of his adult life in a creative-access country in Asia. He is the author of* The History of Christian Missions in Guangxi, China.

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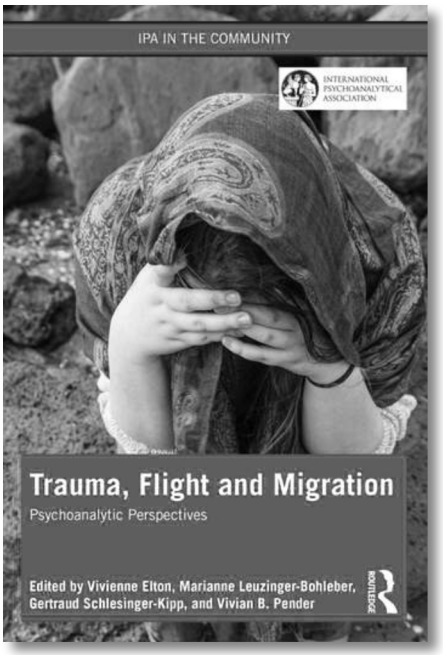
REVIEW: Trauma, Flight, and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives by Vivienne Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivian B. Pender, eds.

Vol 3:1 2023

REVIEWED BY
JESSICA UDALL

Elton, Vivienne, et al. *Trauma, Flight, and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) in the Community Book Series.
New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. 256, ISBN: 978-1-0320-6652-3
$42.95 paperback.



When welcoming immigrants and resettling refugees, host country volunteers often focus on meeting physical needs. While this is indeed necessary, could it be that addressing the mental and emotional needs of these displaced image-bearers is just as—or even more—crucial as a factor in their long-term adjustment?

In the *IPA in the Community Book Series*, the International Psychoanalytic Association brings together expert psychoanalysts to give their perspectives on various kinds of community outreach, and in *Trauma, Flight, and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, those with vast and diverse experience working with migrants and refugees share their insights urgently in light of the "unprecedented number" (p. 1) of people who have been forced to migrate in recent years.

Migration itself is a kind of crisis, regardless of the circumstances surrounding it, but in addition to this, there are often many additional traumatic events—including violence, trafficking, and being sent to detention centers, among other things—which migrants may encounter en route from their motherland to their new home. If not acknowledged and dealt with, these traumas have the potential to prevent those who have experienced them from ever healing and thriving in their new surroundings.

Part A of this edited volume forms the majority of the book and is made up of reports on specific projects based in particular locations. Chapter one discusses working with refugees in Hesse, Germany, which seeks to provide early care for recently arrived immigrants dealing with trauma. The psychoanalysts working with these refugees were also aware that traumatized migrants often have a latency period where they seem to be in a good mental state as they accomplish all the tasks of resettling in a new country (finding a job, getting paperwork in order, etc.) but then they often enter another period of psychological difficulty which is an opportunity to go back and address unresolved trauma and process it at a deeper level. Guidelines for helping include building trust, listening compassionately to a person's individual story, taking care to address feelings of guilt or shame, and suggesting resources for practical coping.

Chapter two discusses the efforts of the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute to assist refugees, paying particular attention to the challenges of including a translator in sessions where there is a language barrier. Chapter three discusses the complexities of the internal migration of Peruvian women, particularly focusing on shifting family dynamics, while chapter four zeroes in on "perinatal migration" (p. 70), exploring the reality that pregnant women and the babies they carry are among some of the most vulnerable migrants both physically and psychologically. Chapter five describes the collaborative effort of mental health professionals in Peru to "assist the population in the reconstruction of their internal world" (p. 90) in the aftermath of a natural disaster, while chapter six is autobiographical in nature, describing how the author has used his training to become deeply "involved in community activities"—including activism on behalf of asylum seekers as a "psychoanalytically informed expert witness" (p. 93).

Chapter seven explores the intergenerational aspect of trauma, since "next generation survivors are left to psychically metabolise inherited trauma" (p. 101), and chapter eight identifies the potential of the psychoanalytical method to provide the stability of a "psychic locus" (p. 115) where meaning can be made of the migration experience. Chapter nine zeros in on understanding mourning as distinct from other mental disorders when encountering migrants who are mentally distressed, and chapter ten narrates the experiences and insights gained by a psychoanalyst interacting with carers and refugees in Lesvos, Greece. Chapter eleven investigates schizoid splitting as a response to trauma and its restrictive and impoverishing effects, as well as the possibility of reintegration.

Chapter twelve explores the ways in which trauma can be articulated and processed in collaboration with a psychoanalytic therapist, and chapter thirteen provides insights into engaging cross-culturally in trauma-focused psychotherapy with East Africans, particularly those from a Muslim background, with chapter fourteen further elaborating the complexities of psychoanalysis when the analyst and the patient come from different cultural backgrounds.

Part B provides a theoretical framework for how psychoanalytic thinking can be helpful in addressing the trauma incurred by those who have migrated, seeking to provide stability and interpersonal interactions, as well as seeking to "[return] the refugees from an experience of passivity to active action" (p. 31), with focus on UN meetings, human rights, and "the right to stay in place" (p. 218).

Strengths of this book include a richness of multiple authors speaking with a deep richness of experience in their psychoanalytic field and the prevalence of insightful case studies illustrating the concepts presented through the presenting issues, backstories, and therapeutic processes of refugees and asylum seekers with whom the authors interacted. Readers who do not have previous training in mental health may find the book somewhat technical, and psychoanalysis itself as a method of therapy may give Christian readers pause, but I would recommend this book for those who want to be part of addressing not just the physical but also the emotional needs of refugees and asylum seekers, to gain exposure to the types of issues that are common for people with traumatic migration stories, and to bring home the stark reality that more research and resources for understanding and processing migration-related trauma are needed which are less specialized and perhaps more accessible both for refugees and asylum seekers themselves and for those who care about them.

Jessica Udall

REVIEW: *Connected Learning: How Adults with Limited Formal Education Learn* by L. Lynn Thigpen

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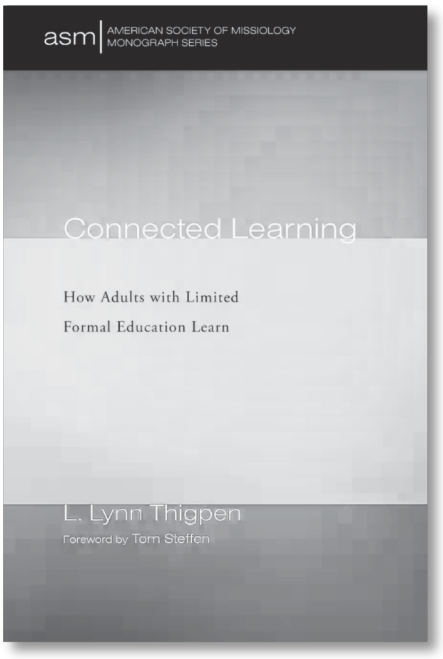
Vol 3:1 2023

REVIEWED BY
CRAIG
MCCORKINDALE

Thigpen, L. Lynn. *Connected Learning: How Adults with Limited Formal Education Learn*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020. 290 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5326-7937-7 $39.00 paperback.



In the context of a pedagogical clash between the literate teacher and ALFE (Adults with Limited Formal Education), Thigpen pursues one question: how do ALFE learn? Through an in-depth study of Cambodian adults, Thigpen's goal is to find a more positive descriptor for this group of learners in contrast to descriptors such as illiterate or oral. Moreover, she seeks to provide strategies to address this gap in pedagogy and reception. The descriptor that Thigpen provides as a replacement for orality is "connected or relational learning."

From this central idea stems further, more particular, conclusions on how ALFE learn. Of particular note are her findings that showed that shame acted as a barrier to life-long learning. Shame as a barrier contrasted with a sense of purpose and hope, stemming from Buddhist or Christian communities, that provided other adults with the ability to persevere in life-long learning.

Based on the idea of connected learning, Thigpen provides a range of suggestions to differing groups in society, from teachers to theological institutions and policymakers, as well as ideas for further research. Her recommendations seek to address the dividing wall between education provision by the literate to those who require a more holistic approach to learning. She rightly urges a view of education that goes beyond teaching literacy to finding the various ways that people learn despite not being able to read.

The key insight from Thigpen's research, in addition to the in-depth description of Cambodian life and culture, is the reminder that all learning is personal, whether by print or other. At times she does push the dichotomy of people versus print too far, muting the fact that even print was written by a person. Notwithstanding this, the framework of learning through people provides a more robust structure to working with those who can't learn through print. Furthermore, working in theological education in Cambodia, reading remains hard for those Khmer that are literate. The pedagogical approach that Thigpen is advocating—going beyond just literacy—is key, even among literate Cambodians. Thus, within this framework of the personal, education is bound to be responsive to the varying needs of different groups in society, rather than seeking to force learners into the one print mold. Educators, not only in Cambodia, but across the board will benefit from interaction with Thigpen's research on how ALFE learn.

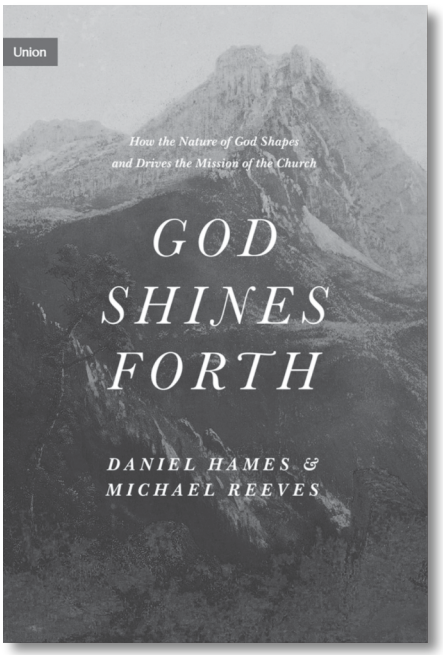
Craig McCorkindale

REVIEW: *God Shines Forth: How the Nature of God Shapes and Drives the Mission of the Church* by Michael Reeves and Daniel Hames

Vol 3:1 2023

Reviewed by Eric Robinson

Reeves, Michael and Hames, Daniel. *God Shines Forth: How the Nature of God Shapes and Drives the Mission of the Church.* Wheaton: Crossway. 2022. 176 pp, ISBN: 978-1-4335-7514-3. $22.99 Hardback.



In their excellent book, *God Shines Forth*, Daniel Hames and Michael Reeves invite the reader into a journey of discovery, asking where we may find the wellspring, motivation, and foundation for mission and evangelism—and ultimately, its core message. Rather than finding its roots in a program, piety, or any other measure we might devise, authentic mission finds its wellspring in the nature and character of God in Jesus Christ. They write: "If someone were to ask us, 'What is God like?' the answer must be 'Jesus Christ'" (37). Through Jesus Christ, God's mission moves outward: "God, in having glory, *radiates*; in having a Word, *speaks*; in having a Son, *loves*. It is his very nature to shine, communicate, and give himself in relationship. This is the beating heart of mission" (37). It is the glory of God in Christ, implanted in the heart of the believer, which shines forth: "We are made to shine out the glory of God that we have seen in Christ, which God has shone into our hearts" (97).

Evangelism that finds its life in Jesus Christ must also hold up Jesus as its core message: "Evangelism is . . . the good news of Christ" (110). And the evangelist must hold out "*Christ* as the gift and as the treasure of heaven" (113). For in "the cross of Christ, God shines forth. His love and life are a streaming fountain of mercy, gladness and treasure" (55). What is offered out to the world through the church's mission

sometimes sees Jesus as a means to "transformed lives, healed hurts and renewed communities . . . rather than the center of them all" (113). Throughout the book, the authors implore the Christian to refocus their understanding of mission on the nature and character of God as revealed in Jesus.

Mission centered on God's work in Jesus Christ should also continually transform the heart and mind of the evangelist: "The foundation of all our mission is our knowledge and enjoyment of God" (127). When we enjoy God's presence, are inspired by God's goodness, and delight in *God*, we bring a message the world of joy from a life transformed. When we struggle, we must "come for our hearts refreshment to Jesus . . . those who would be happy missionaries must know and delight in God" (127-128).

God Shines Forth is a call for renewal. It calls for spiritual renewal and refreshing in the hearts and minds of believers to find their delight in God and in finding delight in God, to joyfully share this message with the world. It calls for a renewal of God-centered mission, where mission's motivation, message, and foundation is found in Jesus Christ, where the goodness and love of God radiates forth to a lost and dying world.

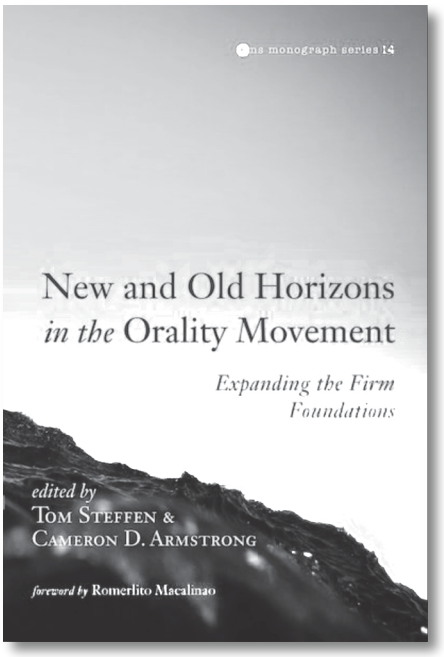
Eric Robinson

REVIEW: *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement: Expanding the Firm Foundation*
by Tom Steffen and Cameron D. Armstrong, eds.

Vol 3:1 2023

Reviewed by Christopher J. Brainos

Edited by Steffen, Tom and Armstrong, Cameron D.. *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement: Expanding the Firm Foundation*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2022. 304 pp., ISBN: 978-1-6667-3080-7. $39.00 paperback.



Tom Steffen and Cameron Armstrong's edited volume, *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement*, explores orality within the context of twenty-first-century missiology. It consists of twelve essays that present the theoretical foundations of orality, explore its applications, and offer some nontraditional applications of orality. Notably, nearly all contributors oppose Ong's dichotomized view of orality and literacy and maintain that orality is not a replacement for literacy but complementary to it. Stark and Barger (chaps 8-9), especially, demonstrate this with their discussion of orality in Bible translation, which reinforces the centrality of written Scriptures to the Christian faith and places orality and literacy in a reciprocal relationship within missionary practice.

The volume's main strength is the proven success of orality strategies around the world. Evans' and Armstrong's (chaps 5-6) respective classroom experiences prove that oral structures are pedagogically effective. Their observations may encourage those working in individualistic contexts, but there is little exploration of the relationship between the efficacy of oral methods and collectivism. If the strength of orality is connected to the truth that Scripture is a metanarrative, are oral methods effective in collectivist cultures because the methods themselves are effective or because they fit within expected social structures?

While the message of the book is well-presented, two issues emerge that could detract from its reception. First, there is no standardization in terminology; some authors protest the use of the term "illiterate" while others use it comfortably. Terms such as "oral learners," "oral preference learners," and "relational learners," are used interchangeably. The inconsistency gives the impression that the contributors are not aligned regarding orality terminology. Second, Part 4 feels out of balance with the rest of the volume. Though exploring various applications of the orality movement is valuable, these chapters read like "rabbit trails" in which orality takes a back seat to the ways it is integrated into other areas of study. More intentionality in linking these expansions to orality studies would create continuity.

Another issue, because of its inclusion as a foundation of the orality movement, is Thigpen's work on "Deconstructing Oral Learning," which ignores the task of education to empower individuals to educate themselves and others. Further, Thigpen (chap 12) does not address the reality that the paradigm of connected learning she suggests leaves the learner subservient to the teacher in a system that inhibits the production of new knowledge. "We are your books" sounds generous but moves quickly to disallowing the creation of any new books. More work to align "connected learning" with the goals of education as a social institution is warranted.

Considering how many unreached people worldwide are not served by literacy-based methods, this volume is needed within the community of intercultural workers, especially those in low-literacy contexts. Pastors, small group leaders, and even North American classroom educators would also benefit from implementing orality practices within their respective fields. Orality is consistent with the intended reception of the biblical text and creates an environment of collective learning. This volume would benefit any Christian looking to integrate these themes into his or her life.

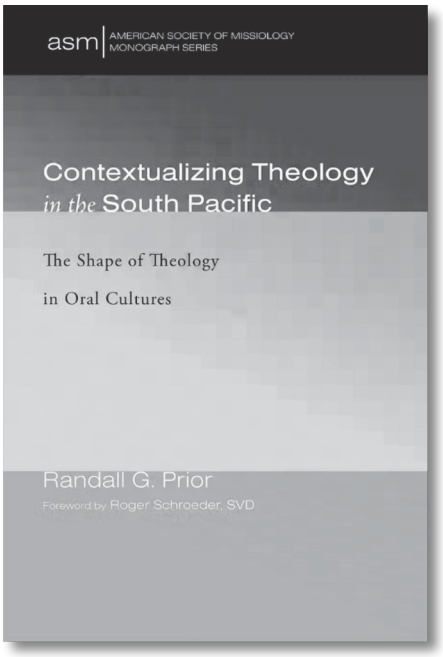
Christopher J. Brainos

REVIEW: *Contextualizing Theology in the South Pacific: The Shape of Theology in Oral Cultures* by Randall G. Prior

Vol 3:1 2023

Reviewed by Joel Atwood

Prior, Randall G. *Contextualizing Theology in the South Pacific: The Shape of Theology in Oral Cultures*. American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 41. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2019. 208 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5326-5857-0. $38.00 paperback.



While anthropologists and linguistics still spend considerable time researching Melanesia—the area of the South Pacific encompassing Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia—missiologists have tended to overlook the smaller islands. This makes Prior's *Contextualizing Theology in the South Pacific: The Shape of Theology in Oral Cultures* a rare and significant project.

Prior's work charts "The Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu" project within the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu (PCV) beginning around 1998. This project included several consultations for local church leaders to develop contextual theologies for Vanuatu that were later published in five books of collected essays. The book includes four chapters discussing the influences on the project, one on the project itself, followed by a brief but impassioned conclusion.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide general orientations to the desire and need to contextualise theology, most of which will be familiar to anyone working in the field, but with a welcome focus on Pacific voices. Chapter 3 sharpens this with a comprehensive survey of how Pacific scholars have defined the content and methodology of theology. For those seeking an orientation to Pacific theologizing, this is worth the price of the book alone.

Chapter 4 lays out Prior's central thesis, which is both common sense and remarkably overlooked: the *mode* of contextualized theology is centrally important. Three issues in the Pacific context directly speak to this issue of methodology: Orality, the absence of what Prior calls the "Enlightenment paradigm" in the region, and the separation of theological colleges from local church communities. For contextual theology to be properly contextual to the South Pacific, it must be orally produced and anchored in local church communities, experiences, and worldviews.

Chapter 5 examines the "Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu" project itself alongside Prior's reflections upon each stage of the project. He clearly sees the second stage as the high point, embodying the *oral* and *communal* methodology argued for in the previous chapters. While measured in his language, the third stage was evidently frustrating for Prior, where further contextualization was confined to the faculty of Talua, the Presbyterian theological college (now Talua Theological Training Institute). The proposed fourth stage and the related "Women in Leadership" project are discussed with optimism, which unfortunately has not translated into reality on the ground in Vanuatu.

We should applaud Prior's attention to a neglected area of the world and to the significant issue of methodology in contextual theology—both of which are necessary and timely correctives. However, there are several areas where his work begs for greater context, nuance, and academic rigor to develop these insights into tools for application in the South Pacific and beyond. Prior's theological bias appears to motivate the glib dismissal of Ma'afu Palu—a significant figure in Pacific theology—because of his evangelical understanding of Scripture. In his discussion of orality and Pacific paradigms, Prior relies on highly limited, outdated, or anecdotal sources such as his own personal diaries and seminal but hardly contemporary work of Walter Ong. Wider engagement in the extensive literature of orality or the ethnography of Vanuatu could make these central sections much more convincing and useful. Finally, a more realistic perspective on the impact of the project is necessary. Despite its fruitful second stage, the project and its successors are no longer being pursued in Vanuatu, and indeed, even its published legacy was not even found in the Talua Theological Training Institute library until purchased in 2022 by the reviewer.

Joel Atwood