

The Sifting of Modern Mission

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ISFM 2019 and the “Reimagining of Frontier Mission”

Mission is being sifted these days. Not only are global conditions requiring an institutional make-over, but the weight of history is calling “mission” to new account. The apparent complicity of our missionary enterprise with the power and abuses of Western civilization is casting a dark shadow over all its advances. The very totality of this narrative makes it suspect, and we’re wary of a cultural agenda that too easily indicts anything evangelical. But in a day of such global transformations, the mission enterprise must not balk at sifting and rethinking its own premises. It’s the necessary first step in reimagining God’s mission today.

ISFM 2019 opened its sessions with this “sifting of mission,” and three articles and two responses under the theme, “Reimagining Frontier Mission,” are included in this issue (others are forthcoming). We invited Mike Stroope to present the thesis of his recent book, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (p. 163). When I first read Mike’s book in preparation, I could feel my inner brake lights go on. I was reluctant to accept his verdict on the modern mission paradigm. The historiography was selective, his narrative seemed too grand. I resisted. But gradually I stopped picking at his historical hermeneutic and began to see how it goaded me to reexamine my own mission narrative. You can also read Martin Accad’s response from his context in the Middle East (p. 169). It’s quite apparent that Mike has struck a nerve and allowed a global critique to be heard.

Both Stroope and Accad call for a brutal pruning of modern mission. Their radical assessment reminds me of the roadside trees I used to see on the route between Casablanca and Marrakech in Morocco. Occasionally the branches of these trees would be cut back to their trunks. Total decapitation. It was brutal, ugly, a row of posts sticking into the sky, seemingly unnecessary. One wondered if they could ever recover. A few months later when I would make the same trip, I’d be surprised to see those same trees with their leaves and branches flourishing. One thinks of the Divine Vinedresser whose pruning can cut us back in similar ways, a “cleaning” (John 15:3) that can bring fruit ever so quickly.

A re-interpretation of mission history can threaten to do the same brutal pruning. One feels a tension. We’re aware of another positive narrative, one that assures us that mission witness and mission institutions have had astounding impact for good in the modern age.¹ Yet, our imaginations must hold these different assessments simultaneously, for in a rapidly shrinking world we often live and work next

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The views expressed in **IJFM** are those of the various authors and not necessarily those of the journal’s editors, the International Society for Frontier Missiology, or the society’s executive committee.

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to those who believe an anti-Christian narrative. We must reimagine witness with that perspective in mind.

So, ISFM 2019 indicated some early directions in our reimagining frontier mission.

Language and terminology must be examined. Both Stroope and Accad agree that any “transcending” of an outdated mission paradigm should taper us back to biblical metaphor—to pictures, not propositions. As I indicated in my ISFM presentation,² our language can lock us into models that desperately need review. Accad suggests that a return to biblical images might help us reimagine an approach more appropriate to the interreligious sensibilities of the Middle East (p. 173). Paul Pennington’s ISFM 2019 presentation on our indiscriminate use of New Testament language will be published in a future issue.

New missiological theory will be introduced. The review of Henning Wrogemann’s comprehensive theory of interreligious relations is a foretaste of new perspectives (p. 202). Too often our mission strategies have been derived from intuitive pragmatism

rather than from a thoughtful biblical theology. In his ISFM plenary, Martin Accad condensed insights from his new book, *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide*, and called for the development of a biblical theology of Islam (p. 173).

Darren Duerksen also presented a short case study from South Asia, one he lifted from chapter 4 of his recent book, *Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom* co-authored with William Dyrness, reviewed on (p. 206). By exploring the tool of “emergence theory,” these two authors offer greater discernment on how the church arises in frontier contexts.

Expect a reformation of the mission agency. Boone Aldridge helped our ISFM imagine the organizational tensions in the strategic transformation of mission agencies. He offered insights from his recent history of Cameron Townsend and the radical reframing of the faith mission paradigm for Bible translation in unreached tribes (p. 181).

Innovation will become more collaborative. In my opening address I encouraged a reimagining that would spotlight the terms and metaphors selected by

those who initially respond to the gospel.³ At the tail end of our sessions, Kevin Higgins and Steven Spicer began to address how innovation in mission will require a process of listening to indigenous voices (articles forthcoming). One of our ISFM colleagues, Bradford Greer, addressed this same incarnational sensitivity to innovation in his presentation to a prominent evangelical seminary this past fall (p. 189).

Reimagining frontier mission begins with sifting, and brutal pruning is sometimes necessary for fruitfulness.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ Robert D. Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* vol. 106, no. 2 (May 2012): 244–274, pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5622/1233367af2dc7ab8186817553c6ae03a3fe9.pdf.

² Brad Gill, “Reimagining Frontier Mission,” *IJFM* 36:3 (Fall 2019): 111, ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/36_3_PDFs/IJFM_36_3-Gill.pdf.

³ Gill, “Reimagining Frontier Mission,” 112–114.

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: The World Consultation on Frontier Missions and the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate “A Church for Every People.”

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go, yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, “to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.” (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.

Reimagining Frontier Mission

Reimagining Witness beyond Our Modern Mission Paradigm

by Michael W. Stroope

I recall, even after more than forty years, an awkward incident during our first months of language study in Sri Lanka. We had gone to a friend's house for dinner. A young girl was serving dinner. In an attempt to practice my new language, I thought, "I will tell her the food was good." I formed the sentence in my head and then spoke three words. She gasped, screamed, covered her mouth, and ran out of the room. I immediately jumped from the table and followed her into the kitchen, and desperately tried to find out what it was that I had said. She would not even look at me but kept waving me off. I learned later that I had said something extremely crude and thus terribly offensive. I had the right words and pronounced them decently, but my offense was in the way I had said what I said, and the tone in which I had spoken.

For those of us who have acquired another language, we know that it is a grave, deep undertaking. Language is more than the correct pronunciation of words. Language is a world of symbols, meanings, and assumptions that reside deep within the mind and forms a distinct way of viewing life. Successful language acquisition means breaking free of the bonds of one's own language world—one's epistemic reality—and entering another. The ultimate solution to my language mishap was not better vocabulary or getting my tongue to behave. It was no less than a conversion of my particular English linguistic categories and logic to a distinctively different world.

The focus of this essay is the use of terms and concepts. And yet, I am convinced this focus has more to do with the mental conception of reality, than with what words we actually use. So, I wish to explore the language of "mission," not just "mission" as a word, but "mission" as a mental frame that defines reality and thus orders our responses. First, I will discuss the origins of mission language, how the word has been used historically, and the ways it governs our understanding of and practice within the church-world encounter. This first section is a summation of a much longer argument found in my 2017 book, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition*.¹ Second, I will speak

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to how mission, as a logic or framework, produces a restricted view of reality that actually hinders rather than helps in our response to the world. Then third, I will advocate for a shift in language, one that is meant to liberate us to imagine and to act in new and fresh ways.

My beginning premise is that while there are problems within the mission enterprise with such matters as structure, strategy, and support, these are not the chief problem. Structure, strategy, and support certainly require careful and thoughtful attention, but there is a foundational, and thus more urgent, problem that must be addressed. It is not just that mission has problems, but mission itself is the problem. The conceptual and linguistic basis, upon which these other matters rest, is the problem. Put bluntly, mission, as a linguistic and conceptual framework, hampers our ability to address wider concerns. Thus, it is essential that we address the foundation that is mission. In my book, I explore a number of issues related to the problem of mission. I will mention five that are for me the most troublesome. To be clear, my aim in this first section is to unseat or disrupt mission's status as sacred, unassailable language. Only then will we be free to critique its power as a framing reality and be able to consider a shift to a new linguistic and conceptual paradigm.

Concern Number One: *“Mission,” as we use it today, is not, in the literal sense, biblical language.*

An explicit lexical trail from the biblical languages to the English term “mission” cannot be established.² In the New Testament, we find two verbs that denote the act of sending—*pepo* and *apostellein*. Both are used throughout the New Testament to convey ordinary and commonplace kinds of sending—demons being sent into swine, workers being sent into the vineyard, Herod sending soldiers to kill male children, and the sending

of a representative or envoy. The noun form, *apostolos*, specifies one who is sent as a messenger. Translators of Greek to Latin and English rarely rendered these “sending” verbs and noun as “mission” or “missionary.” In fact, the Greek *apostolos* has usually been made into a loan word—especially for ecclesiastical references. In the case of Greek to modern English translations, translators have seldom rendered *apostolos* as “missionary.”³ When they have done so, it has usually been as a paraphrase, and not as actual translation, and thus as a dynamic or functional equivalent rather than a literal or formal translation of the Greek. So, while one might argue for equivalence in meaning, one cannot assert a direct



or literal trail from one to the other. Mission might be inferred from Scripture but not literally established. Thus, we must acknowledge that “mission” is less than biblical or sacred language.

So, why is this a concern? The direction in which we read and interpret Scripture should be of great concern to all of us. If mission is not biblical language, then it should not be declared as the authoritative or decisive lens through which we read Scripture nor the governing hermeneutic by which Scripture is to be interpreted. The primacy of the Word of God demands we begin with the revelation of God rather than extra-biblical language freighted with modern ideas of organization, strategy,

and funding. If we are not careful, we can make Paul and Silas into modern American missionaries or equate their preaching and imprisonment at Philippi with a youth mission trip to Haiti. This is called eisegesis—not exegesis. And while every interpreter brings his or her cultural and linguistic assumptions to the text, we must hold to the principle of *sola scriptura* and do our best to let Scripture form, shape, and critique the modern career missionary and the youth trip to Haiti and not the other way around. When mission is exalted to the status of biblical language, it becomes sacred language and thus beyond critique.

Concern Number Two: *The witness of the people of God in Scripture and the early church was not a singular expression, such as we commonly think of mission, but it was a multifaceted phenomenon.*

We read of activities such as proclaiming, teaching, confessing, telling, pleading, and testifying. Those involved in these activities were disciples, elders, bishops, saints, pastors, teachers, evangelists, apostles, bondservants, fishermen, tanners, sojourners, pilgrims, and martyrs. No one activity dominates or excludes others, and no one vocation or role negates other roles and vocations. Scripture reports that the advance of the gospel was wide-ranging and diverse. The same can be said of the church of the post-New Testament period. Activities and roles in the spread of the gospel expanded rather than consolidated or contracted. My study of primary sources of the early church and its growth reveals that “mission” was not the dominating terminology or frame. In fact, mission language is nonexistent in the writings and accounts of Patrick, Columba, Gregory the Great, Boniface, and the Nestorians, as well as the earliest historians of Christianity, such as Eusebius, Rufinus, and the Venerable Bede.⁴

We may feel the need to portray the activities of the early church as

“mission” and name its “missionaries,” but to what end? Plainly stated, it is anachronistic to present church history or the expansion of Christianity as “mission history.” Rather than compressing the multitude of realities and variety of actors into a single, aggregating reality called “mission,” why not call activities and people by what they were? The historical record shows that methods, actions, and initiatives were socially located and situationally driven, and thus they were reported via a wide array of terms, processes, and agents. Compression of these into “mission” does not help our understanding and can in fact lead to erroneous conclusions. For example, reducing everything to “mission” leaves the impression that the expansion of Christianity was a professional endeavor that excluded, or excused, the majority of those in the church. From this, we might conclude that the Great Commission can be delegated or is the assignment of only a few.

Concern Number Three: *The historical fact is that the rhetoric of mission, as used by the church today, is not ancient but modern.*

Mission became the way to describe the activity of the church only in the sixteenth century. Prior to this time, mission was chiefly a term to describe the diplomatic and military activities of Spain and Portugal, as well as individuals who were political agents of these empires. The exception was early Christian writers who used the Latin *missio* to explain the inner workings of the Trinity. We find *missio* employed in this way by Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Augustine, and then later and more extensively by Thomas Aquinas. In their use, *missio* is restricted to the divine, inter-workings of the Son and Holy Spirit, and never refers to the church or to human agency.⁵ But this changes in 1539, when Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, introduces mission as a way to speak about vocation and human agency, as well as the Catholic Church’s

Early Christian writers used the Latin *missio* to explain the inner workings of the Trinity and never for the church or human agency.

encounter with the wider world. The papal bull that establishes the Jesuits initiates the modern ecclesial use of “mission.” Likewise, Ignatius creates “a special vow” that obligates the Jesuits to go wherever the Roman pontiff might send them. This unique Ignatian innovation becomes known as the “mission vow.”⁶ In a relatively short period of time, Ignatius’ notion of obedience and mobility evolves into the sending of ecclesial agents to places near and far. One of the first of these agents was Frances Xavier who traveled to India as legate of the Portuguese crown, as well as a representative of the Roman Church. This Ignatian linguistic appropriation of mission for the church is widely acknowledged by both Catholic and Protestant scholars, such as Paul Kollman, John O’Malley, and David Bosch.⁷ Again, the concern is that the lineage of mission is modern and not ancient, and its current meaning and use is quite recent.

Concern Number Four: *Mission rhetoric is historically linked to Spanish and Portuguese exploration and the establishment of colonies in India, the far East, Latin America, and the American Southwest.*

These efforts were justified and fueled in large measure by ongoing Crusades against Muslims, as well the recent Reconquest of Spain and Portugal from Moorish control. Various attempts have been made to minimize this connection or to isolate them as exceptions, and yet, it is clear the rise of mission language coincides linguistically and politically with reconquest, conquistadors, expeditions, and colonialization. The Vasco de Gama era was at the same time the era of the Latin Rite, as mission agents of the Roman Catholic Church personified the advance of imperial Spain and Portugal.

Protestants did not immediately adopt the language of mission, mainly because of its implications. It was a Catholic word that implied the expansion of Iberian Catholic powers. This made the term especially difficult for Protestants, since they had often been the target of Catholic “mission” effort to reconvert Europe. Also, the term was tied to exploration and colonizing efforts, and as Protestants had no colonies, it made no sense to appropriate the word. For example, even though Matthew 28:19–20 was the centerpiece of Anabaptist theology and practice, mission language was not part of their early confessions or the language of leaders, such as Balthasar Hubmaier and Menno Simons.⁸ The Great Commission was binding on all its members, and yet, Anabaptists self-identified as pilgrims and martyrs, not missionaries. For them, mission carried territorial implications. And since everyone, everywhere needed salvation, especially Catholics, the Great Commission was without territorial bounds.

The historical record shows that Protestants adopted the language of mission at the same time Protestant nations, such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and England, acquired their own colonies. The Danish-Halle Mission was one of the first Protestant societies with mission in its title. The back story is that the Danish Crown had established a presence in Tranquebar, India, nearly a century prior (1616) in the form of a trading company and a colony of Danish citizens. The Danish Crown supported the founding of the Mission in order to bring all the ruler’s subjects, both Danes and Indians, under the ruler’s religion. The king’s action was also a move to supplant Portuguese Jesuits who were also present in Tranquebar.⁹ Therefore, the founding of Danish-Halle Mission in

1704 followed the pattern and practices already established by Portuguese and Spanish Catholics.

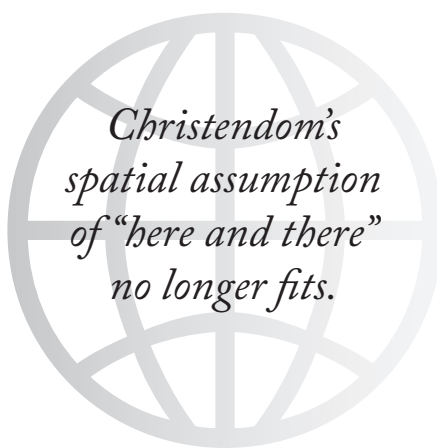
Just as Ignatius innovated mission language for the Roman Catholic Church, the Danish-Halle Mission initiated mission as ecclesial language for Protestants. In the course of the next century, mission moved from questionable language on the margins of the Protestant Church to a firmly established tradition.

The concern is that claiming mission as a distinctively Protestant or Evangelical endeavor is simply inaccurate. Its roots are located in sixteenth century Iberian, Catholic expansion.

Concern Number Five: In modern times, Protestant mission converges with the optimism of Western Christianity to create a spirit of triumph and a sense of manifest destiny.

The height of this optimism can be seen in the language of the Edinburgh Conference, 1910. From beginning to end, mission language saturated the conference addresses and reports. “Mission” and “missionary” modified ideas and concepts, qualified activities and actors, and quantified aims and objectives. The answer to the “modern missionary situation” was mission or missionary work, undergirded by a wide and varied list of actors, entities, actions, and arenas, all qualified by the missionary adjective—missionary standards, missionary intelligence, missionary buildings, missionary money, missionary spirit, and on and on. It was announced that mission was a modern enterprise whose time had come.¹⁰ Mission progress and triumphs were lauded in military and crusade-like language of conquest, turning heathendom into Christendom, as well as the demeaning language of barbarian, uncivilized, and heathen. Along with optimism, modern notions of progress, consumption, and efficiency became defining ideals and goals in mission practice and planning. Mission epitomized the spirit of Western advance and modernization.

This unbridled optimism came undone immediately following the Edinburgh Conference, as the world erupted into war, with Christian nations slaughtering each other. The great depression followed. Then one after another colonial populations initiated their campaigns for independence. Simultaneously, the revival of world religions and nationalism surged among Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus. All of this signaled a gathering storm for the mission enterprise. The hope of evangelizing the world in the current generation seemed unlikely. The colonial legacy of mission created a spirited backlash among newly liberated, former colonies. Access for missionaries retracted rather than



expanded, and mission opportunities were no longer “unprecedented” but chaste and limited.

In the past half-century, a reevaluation of mission language in all its forms has commenced. The loss of confidence and optimism resulted in a rethinking, revisioning, and rehabilitating of mission that has been ongoing since the middle of the twentieth century. The result is that mission has become a conflated and often confusing term, taking on a wide array of competing meanings and uses. In a very real sense, Stephen Neill’s quip, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission” sounds truer today than when first spoken in 1959.¹¹ If Neill were alive today, he

might remark that because *nothing* is mission, *something* must take its place.

So, my five concerns in summary are—mission is not sacred, revealed language. Its origins lie in the power dynamics of 16th century Western expansion. Its original historical context is imbued with notions of conquest, manifest destiny, and colonialization. Rather than unencumbered or benign, mission is a weighted and burdensome term. And though the modern mission paradigm may have operated with a type of force in the Age of Discovery, and while it may have advanced the gospel by way of devout people and strategic means well into the twentieth century, that paradigm is now outdated and offers only a restricting framework. Mission is a modern linguistic innovation, and thus we should not feel duty-bound or obligated to maintain and uphold its use or its logic.

You may be thinking, “So what! Does any of this matter? It’s only a matter of semantics. It’s just words.” Well, words matter, because they tell us who we are and they contain the content that forms our actions. “Mission” is like an old, comfortable house. In its rooms, hallways, and attic are the accumulated bits that represent the distinct ways of a former time.

The studs and drywall of this house are full of assumptions, built into its structure through the generations. And while once useful and workable, they are now unsound and even dangerous. For example, Christendom’s spatial assumption of “here and there” no longer fits. Christianity cannot, and should not, be defined in terms of territory or distance. Because Christianity exists around the globe, witness no longer traffics in one direction but from anywhere to everywhere. For sure, this means that the mindset of exploration and colonization from which mission emerged does not address current realities. Such stark religious territorial differentiations have died. We live in neighborhoods in which racial, linguistic, and religious

mixing is taking place at a breakneck pace. At a workplace in Houston, it is likely that a Hindu is seated in the cubicle, next to a Christian. Cross-cultural witness is a daily possibility for every Christian. Coupled with this is the rapid decline of the church in the West. Nigerians, Koreans, and Chinese are making their way to our shores in hopes of converting us. “Mission” seems to be worn and tired language incapable of responding to global changes. It is a mental model for a time and world that no longer exist. The challenges of today require a different structural framework. The ethos and spirit of modernity, with its unexamined values of progress, individualism, cause and effect, and commodification, are hardwired into mission and limit our ability to imagine what could be.

Echoing through the rooms, hallways, and corners of this old house is identity. Identity is the way we see ourselves, present ourselves, and how others view us. Identity is central to our operating logic, as we move through life and encounter others. More than ever, how we identify ourselves is a primary concern. As the world becomes more and more polarized, it matters who we say we are. If our goal is to live faithfully and speak with clarity about Christ in these confusing days, we will want to identify ourselves clearly and publicly as fellow human beings who are devoted to Jesus Christ, who follow Christ’s teachings and his distinct way of life. If we are to suffer rejection, persecution, or even death, it should be for the right reason, the highest calling—that is, identification with Christ. Mission and missionary are not sacred brands that must be emblazoned across our chest and defended to the death. Even more concerning is the internal tension many of us have to navigate when we are forced to identify ourselves one way at home among constituents and family and then another way in the places where we live and work. We know that in order to be undivided and authentic in our person and as

Rather than conveying that we are objectifying or conquering, people need to hear us address them as neighbors, fellow human beings, and friends.

witnesses, we must live open lives in which people know us intimately, and the most precious parts of our lives are not hidden but on full display.

Above all, at the foundation of this modern abode is a pursuit that is less than ultimate. A passage often quoted to justify mission is John 20:21—“As the Father has sent me, so send I you.” The argument is that in “sent” we find the biblical idea of “mission.” And yet, Jesus’ emphasis in these words is on something other than the operation of sending, something more than the pursuit of mission. In the previous verse, Jesus focuses the disciples’ attention on his hands and side, on his wounds. He then says, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Jesus is saying, as, or for the same purpose, the Father has sent me, I am sending you. Sacrificial suffering is the point. Sending is only a modest means to the goals of love and sacrifice. When conveyance to these ends becomes the emphasis rather than ends themselves, the implications of Jesus’ suffering and death become less than ultimate. Mission, at best, is a vehicle; it is a means to an end. We know that getting on a plane and flying over salt water does not change our character or turn us into witnesses. Sending and going are not enough. Our foundational call is to Christ—to a cruciform life—and not to mission.

So, what am I proposing? I suggest we speak in the sacred language of Scripture and that we embody the logic found in these holy words. Such words as love, covenant, reconciliation, witness, sojourner, and kingdom of God, should define our identity and determine our internal logic. Rather than a historically overworked and over-burdened word, such as missionary, it is far better to identify ourselves as followers of Christ,

devotees of Jesus, disciples, or pilgrims in the Jesus Way. Rather than language that may convey that we are objectifying, conquering, or winning, people of this world need to hear us address them as neighbors, fellow human beings, and friends. The realities of the current age require language that invigorates our engagement with those who do not know Christ, words that include all believers, and language that allows us to reimagine witness beyond the boundaries of the modern mission paradigm.

So, you might be asking, “How exactly might we reimagine witness beyond the modern mission paradigm?” Well, as I see it, we have three options . . .

Option 1: Ban Mission Language

This, of course, is highly unlikely and really unreasonable. Mission, missionary, and missional are deeply embedded in the language of the church, literature, and history, and thus, these words are not going away anytime soon. And they should not. They are part of the historical discourse as we talk about a particular past and a historical tradition in the expansion of Christianity.

Option 2: Do Nothing About Mission Language

It is equally untenable to continue justifying and promoting mission language as if it is sacred language and a viable framework from which to operate. We must scrutinize the way we talk among ourselves about the church-world encounter, as well as to the people outside the church.

Option 3: Invite Others To Move Out of the Mission House, through Constructive Linguistic Variation

In my classes, in conversation with friends and colleagues, and in my work with churches, I make a concerted effort to speak with words that deviate from the mission norm. This may

mean I speak in longer, more detailed sentences or with more situational or socially located speech. As I deviate, my hope is that people will question, either consciously or unconsciously, their own word choice, and change their speech. My rewording is an invitation—not a command. I do not correct someone when they use the M-word (that would be rude), but I am continually rewording witness aloud in the hearing of others. Then, I pray for an awakening of sorts. I pray that people discover ways of deviating from what has been their norm, not just linguistically but in terms of their mental model. My hope is they will discover a fresh framework for witness. I am finding that my own linguistic variations are forcing me to be a more intentional Christ follower and a better communicator. And my prayers for others have awakened me to my own issues of power and my need to be humble and clear in my intentions.

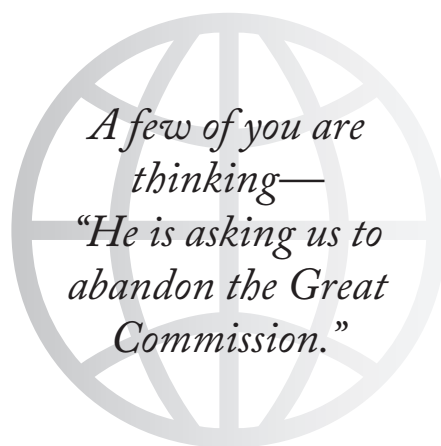
My words of choice have become “pilgrim witness” for how I self-identify and “pilgrim imagination” for the framework or logic from which I am to operate.¹² Pilgrim or sojourner is a rich biblical image that describes a host of Bible characters and highlights a number of important biblical ideals, such as: we are people on the way. We are to live alongside others in humility and service. We are weak and powerless. We, like Israel, are wandering exiles. We, like Jesus, are to sacrifice and suffer. And, of course, witness is rich, biblical language, as well.

So, how might this kind of rewording or deviating actually happen? Well, rather than merely stating that our church is taking the youth on a “mission trip,” a more constructive and imaginative course would be to think through where we are going, why we are going, what we will actually do, and what we hope to accomplish. So, I would reword “mission trip” in this way:

A group of our high schoolers will be in the Dominican Republic for two

weeks, working alongside Christian brothers and sisters in the ministry of their local church in order to show love and give a witness to youth in the surrounding neighborhood through a sports camp. We pray that our high schoolers will see that Christ is at work in the Dominican Republic and that our high schoolers will receive a witness from Christians who live there.

This descriptive rewording communicates that this activity is more than about travel, it is reciprocal, the point is love and witness, and local Christians are the prime actors. Or rather than talking about the “mission field,” we should do all we can to move away from objectifying language by calling people by who they are and how



they describe themselves—Malays, Lebanese, or Sri Lankans. Or rather than speaking in the code of “missional church,” or “missional living,” we should give careful thought to what we are trying to communicate and then speak in clear, precise language. Rather than saying, “everyone is to be a missionary,” why not lead people to move to more descriptive and richer language that affirms all work is God-given, every vocation is sacred, and witness to Christ is essential for all Christians. Or rather than operating from “mission,” a modern paradigm, wedded to outdated ideas of distance and erroneous notions of power, we might choose to undertake the pioneering task of imagining life

and witness anew from the perspective of a pilgrim who travels along the uncharted terrain of the boundless and coming reign of God.

A few of you are thinking—“He is asking us to abandon the Great Commission.” No, it is quite the opposite. Faithfulness to Christ’s commission means we clarify our words and includes a responsibility to lead others to adjust their mental framework to fit current realities. Hear my plea—it is only as we reimagine witness beyond the modern mission paradigm that we will be able to rise to the challenge of this cultural moment. For sure, reimagining is more than saying appropriate words in the right way. It is the deep, revolutionary work of deviating, rewording, and reimagining. Reimagining moves us to a different place, one from which we are free to reorder our participation in the gospel and to position ourselves for fresh and revolutionary witness. I invite you to join me in this pioneering venture. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017).

² For the full discussion, see Stroope, 58–66.

³ See Stroope, 64–65.

⁴ For the full discussion of these primary sources, see Stroope, 107–42.

⁵ See Stroope, 245–46.

⁶ The occasion and reasons for Ignatius’ appropriation of “mission” are explored in Stroope, 238–48.

⁷ See footnote 18 in Stroope, 243

⁸ See Stroope, 300–302.

⁹ See Stroope, 309–10.

¹⁰ See Stroope, 329–38.

¹¹ Stephen Neill, *Christian Missions* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 81.

¹² For a fuller description of a “pilgrim witness,” see Stroope, 355–85.

Article Response

A Response to Michael Stroope

by Martin Accad

Reading Mike Stroope's thought-provoking thesis, it would be easy at first to think that he was making a big deal about a marginal semantic issue. But as one progresses through his thinking, one eventually realizes that he was serious when he says in his paper, "It is not just that mission has problems, but mission itself is the problem." (p. 164)

Over the past few weeks since I read Mike's book, I dropped the bomb a few times in conversations or seminars (always giving due credit to Mike of course), that "mission" and "missionary" are not biblical terms, and puzzlement was always the reaction. It puzzled me too at first. Often being taken by surprise is the beginning of a new learning moment. Mike does well at building on this by pointing out that the Bible uses other concepts, such as "witness," that this witness was carried out through a vast array of activities and types of proclamation, and that this was done by people with a multitude of various gifts and callings. In this way, Mike "de-specializes" and thus "demystifies" the function and role of mission work and of the missionary.

Most important, perhaps, is Mike's demonstration of how closely the whole concept and language of mission has flirted with the history of conquest, human power, and colonization; in a word, with "Christendom." To realize, for instance, that Protestants had no use of the language of mission (because they viewed it as a Catholic aberration) until Protestant nations emerged—such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and England—and after they acquired their own colonies, is rather incriminating and paradigm shifting.

At this point, it seems that Mike feels he has gone too far, so he tries to rescue his destabilized reader a little bit with these comforting words:

And though the modern mission paradigm may have operated with a type of force in the Age of Discovery, and while it may have advanced the gospel by way of devout people and strategic means well into the twentieth century, that paradigm is now outdated and offers only a restricting framework. (p. 166)

But now that he has won me over to his thesis, I want to respond to these last words of caution.

Has the modern mission paradigm really "operated with effect and force" for the proclamation of the kingdom of God and its values and alternative vision of the world, or has it operated for the advance of western adventurism and economics? Has it really "certainly advanced the gospel," or rather advanced western cultures and values? Could it be that the progress and harvest of the gospel has happened—albeit weakly in the Muslim world—*despite*, rather than *thanks to*, the mission enterprise? Certainly, some good has happened because there were true disciples of Jesus who were drawn into the enterprise. But so much more happens if the patronizing colonial mission "enterprise" leaves faithful disciples of Jesus alone rather than dragging them into its political agenda of domination.

I remember, a few years ago, when I visited a so-called "slave castle" on the southern coast of Ghana. Right at the center of the castle was a little chapel. I could see in my mind's eye the slave masters gathering here regularly, morning and evening, to pledge once more their allegiance to their monstrous god after abusing another few hundred dehumanized fellow-human-beings. I was physically sick for half a day. I threw up multiple times. I wept uncontrollably for about four hours nearly non-stop. I was shivering like a leaf. Mercifully, a dear Ghanaian pastor graciously took me with him in his car, and away from the bus and the rest of the group. He prayed and grieved with me on the horrors of the colonial missionary enterprise. After a few days, when I was able to process what had happened to me, I wrote a blog entitled: "My Inner Journey to Hell and Back."¹

Close to the end of Mike's important paper, he makes a statement which—it seems to me—might reveal the subconscious motivation that is getting western centers of missionary power to revisit the concept of mission:

Nigerians, Koreans, and Chinese are making their way to our shores in hopes of converting us. "Mission" seems to be worn, tired language that cannot respond to these and other changes. It is a mental model for a time and world that no longer exists. The challenges of today require a different structural framework. (p. 167)

Could it be that the repentance of the missionary enterprise derives from the discomfort that the western "Christian" world is experiencing as a result of having become the object of mission? Is it so hard to be the object of a missionary enterprise?! Is it disturbing that people from the ends of the earth want to change and transform you before trying to understand you? If this is how the western church now feels, then perhaps it is finally able to understand how Orthodox and Maronite Christians in eastern parts of the world feel and have felt for nearly two centuries about Protestant missionaries, and about Latin Catholic missionaries before that.

Mike Stroope's revisiting of the whole concept and language of mission is very welcome indeed! But let us also ask

As an Arab Christian, as one from a “numerical minority” community, I find great inspiration in four metaphors of the kingdom from the Gospel according to Matthew: “salt,” “light,” “mustard seed,” and “leaven.”

ourselves critically: Are we changing the rules of the game now that we have become the object of the game?

Personally, Mike’s book and paper make me feel like abandoning the language of mission altogether and to exchange it for more biblical language. I like his concept of “linguistic deviation.” Just one example is the recent shift in mission quarters from the word MBB to describe a “Muslim Background Believer,” to BMB, a “Believer from a Muslim Background.” What semantic game are we playing? We are called to be “disciples” of Jesus, and all of us have a background. Sometimes it is helpful to refer to this background, but using the acronym jargon is more often than not terribly objectifying. I am “a disciple of Jesus from a Christian background.” Some of my brothers and sisters in the body are “disciples of Jesus from a Muslim background.” Others are “disciples from secularist backgrounds.”

My favorite language is the language of the kingdom of God. And as an Arab Christian, as one belonging to what I have often referred to as a “numerical minority” community, rather than simply to a “minority,” I find great inspiration in four metaphors of the kingdom from the Gospel according to Matthew: “salt,” “light,” “mustard seed,” and “leaven.” The first two have to do with the nature of who we are called to be in our context: less is more and too much is unpleasant. The last two have to do with the effect and impact of being children of the kingdom: the community of the kingdom is a shelter, a blessing, a home for a great variety of birds, a warm loaf of bread that can be shared joyfully with all those around us.

I hope that in a few years we will look back and be able to say that Mike’s study has delivered the final blow to the concept of mission that has used the language of oppression and domination and conquest, and that it was the beginning of the rebirth of biblical metaphors of the entire body of children of the kingdom being a blessing to all those around. It is because we have lost this language that, I believe, we are unable to welcome the stranger and the migrant anymore. We happily get on a plane or a boat to go and “save” the Syrian, the Iraqi, the Afghan, or the Somali. But when they show up at our door, that is a different matter. The spirit of self-protective Christendom takes over from the spirit of conquering Christendom.

It is because of this language of Christendom that we have developed xenophobia instead of philoxenia. What will we do with the *xenos*—the foreigner? Will we show them *xenophobia*—fear of foreigner? Or will we express to them *philoxenia*—love of foreigner? I believe that if we want to know if our church is calibrated properly with the biblical call to witness, we need to reflect on how our church responds and interacts with the *xenos* at its door: with *phobia*, or with *philos*? **IJFM**

Martin Accad is the third generation of a family deeply involved in building genuine loving relationships with Muslims, sharing the life and call of Jesus with them. In 2001, he obtained a PhD in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations from Oxford University. Accad is Chief Academic Officer at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Lebanon and holds faculty appointments in Islamic Studies at both ABTS and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. He also directs the Institute of Middle East Studies at ABTS, an annual conference on the Middle East and Islam, and the Institute’s new Master of Religion in Middle Eastern and North African Studies.

Endnotes

¹ Martin Accad, “My Inner Journey to Hell and Back,” IMES blog, April 24, 2014 (last accessed Dec 2, 2019: <https://abtslebanon.org/2014/04/24/my-inner-journey-to-hell-and-back/>).

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Reimagining Frontier Mission Sacred Misinterpretation across the Christian-Muslim Divide

by Martin Accad

The trauma of physical and sexual abuse, broken relationships, devastating wars, racial injustice, economic woes, and personal loss has destroyed for many the illusion of sanctuary and wholeness in the here and now. Christendom assumptions regarding place and privilege that exist throughout the Western world, and its refrains of God and country, triumphant Christianity, and naive optimism, ring hollow in the face of such severe personal and societal afflictions. When no longer culturally privileged or politically courted, Western Christians will have to choose whether or not they will sojourn as aliens and pilgrims in the wasteland of what was once Christendom. To think otherwise is a delusion.¹

These are the words of Michael Stroope's powerful critique of the post-Christendom church in the Western world. But these could just as well have been the words of Michael the Syrian (the Great), the famous Chronicler of the twelfth century who, after the sacking of Edessa by the Turks in the 1140s, exclaimed that

the city of Abgar, the friend of Christ, was trampled underfoot *because of our iniquity*... Some aged priests... recited the words of the prophet, "I will endure the Lord's wrath, because I have sinned against Him and angered Him." And they did not take flight, nor did they cease praying until the sword rendered them mute.²

Granted that the language of Stroope does not sound as apocalyptic as that of Michael the Syrian. But it is not unusual for church historians to observe the unravelling of an era by bemoaning the misconduct of the church, fallen victim to its own complacency. Philip Jenkins, too, in his pessimistic [survey of](#) the decline of Eastern Christianity, *The Lost History of Christianity*, describes the ever-repeating cycle of the church in history, from rise to political triumphalism, to collapse under the burden of its own political maneuverings, as it falls prey to its thirst for worldly power.

Christendom Is Dead!

Praise the Lord! And with it, one can hope, triumphalist Christianity and its hollow mission . . .

The first ascent of the church from a persecuted community of martyrs and saints to that of political masters and oppressors built gradually upon the achievement of the Edict of Milan in 313. This edict proclaimed the end of

Editor's Note: This paper was originally presented at the EMS/TSFM 2019 annual conference under the theme "Mission in Global Crisis." The author's assessment of the history of Christian mission to Islam as a journey through "sacred misinterpretation" is treated more comprehensively in his recent book, Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide (Eerdmans, 2018).

Martin Accad is the third generation of a family deeply involved in building genuine loving relationships with Muslims, sharing the life and call of Jesus with them. In 2001, he obtained a PhD in Islam and Christian-Muslim relations from Oxford University. Accad is Chief Academic Officer at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) in Lebanon and holds faculty appointments in Islamic Studies at both ABTS and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. He also directs the Institute of Middle East Studies at ABTS, an annual conference on the Middle East and Islam, and the Institute's new Master of Religion in Middle Eastern and North African Studies.

the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire and the return of confiscated properties to the church. But with the granting of temporal power, the Edict of Milan had also inaugurated the rise of Christendom, which may rightly be viewed as the end of the church of the New Testament and of the early apostles. 1700 years later, Christendom is still dying hard. Over the past century of war and devastation, and of massive people migration, our world has witnessed the rise and fall of secularist reactionism to Christendom's hegemony over human societies. But in parallel as well, we have been witnessing the ascent of new forms of religious fundamentalism and militantism. Not much has changed. History is cyclical. Michael Stroope's warning that

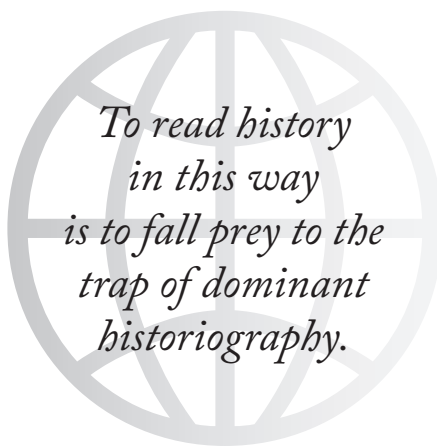
Western Christians will have to choose whether or not they will sojourn as aliens and pilgrims in the wasteland of what was once Christendom

is a quandary that Eastern Christians have had to face previously at several historical points. The history of the Eastern church's decline is a testimony to its repeated failure to make the right choices.

But to read history in this way is also to fall prey to the trap of dominant historiography. Do church historians tend to hear too loudly the voice of *royal* history? Indeed, even 1700 years later, we are still also able to trace a continuous line of witness-martyrs here and there, of silent *pilgrims* within the church, to use Stroope's own language. Pilgrim witnesses continue steadily throughout history mostly silent, and mostly undocumented by the historians of the "royal court." It is often those about whom we hear the least, those who never "write home," who carry out most faithfully the work of the kingdom.

In the early church of the 5th and 6th centuries, so richly documented by social historian Peter Brown, the image of the venerated martyr of the early church morphed into that of

the desert saint, the pilgrim towards whom populations flocked for comfort and counsel as a form of resistance to a rising and increasingly oppressive Christendom.³ At the height of the Fifth Crusade, in 1219, when mainstream Christianity was represented by armored knights and military conquest, Saint Francis of Assisi, who had embraced the vow of poverty, crossed the battle line with a companion to preach the gospel of peace to the Egyptian Sultan al-Kamil in the hope of converting him. One thinks as well of the 15th century Anabaptists who, at the height of the Western church's power, condemned any involvement of the church in war, violence, or political participation. We think of Karl



Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who resisted Nazi Germany at a time when mainline German Protestantism had been co-opted by the regime. Many more examples of pilgrims can be found, who challenged peacefully the church's collusion with political power, conquest, and oppression.

When the metaphors of human power come crashing down in the public imagination, the biblical metaphors of the kingdom can find their way back into life. Children of the kingdom are pilgrims in society as the "salt" and "light" of witness. Though we are invited to embrace the humble status of a small "mustard seed" or of a small quantity of "leaven," these are the

seeds of hope and faith, the "leaven" whose effect on the dough becomes irresistible. At this heyday of global conflict, when the church has much to repent for its involvement in mission often complicit with colonialism in a post-colonial world, Christians may well have to decide whether we are willing to embrace once again the humble metaphors of the kingdom as a way of life, or simply delude ourselves in the conviction of infallibility and perpetuity.

Dialogue and Peacebuilding as Core Components of Kingdom Witness Today

My call to the missionary community is for a recalibration of our witness to meet the challenges of living in multifaith societies. Given the deepening chasm of understanding that dominates relations between various religious groups, and given the gravity of global conflicts in which religions are central actors, I believe that there cannot be true kingdom witness today that does not involve dialogue and peacebuilding. The problem with these two words is that they are often understood as being akin to "compromise" within Evangelical circles. Let us reflect briefly, therefore, on how we can avoid the sort of dialogue that leads to syncretistic apathy, while also avoiding any sort of polemical militancy. I have developed what I call the SEKAP Spectrum for Christian-Muslim interaction, which identifies five positions on a continuum between these two extremes. These positions are reflected in the SEKAP acronym, which stands for "Syncretistic," "Existential," "Kerygmatic," "Apologetic," and "Polemical." I have sought to argue that "Kerygmatic" interaction is the sort of kingdom witness most faithful to biblical teaching. As I have written elsewhere:

The kerygmatic approach to Christian-Muslim interaction is thus devoid of polemical aggressiveness, apologetic

defensiveness, existential adaptiveness, or syncretistic elusiveness... It needs essentially no militant enforcers, no fanatic defenders, no smart adapters, and no crafty revisers.⁴

As we reflect on the balancing role of dialogue and peacebuilding in our kerygmatic witness to the world we live in, metaphors of the kingdom may offer insight into this reflection. First, *kerygmatic witness is Christ-centered rather than Christianity-centered*. When we engage in kerygmatic witness, we disengage from the cosmic battle between religions. There is a disarming aspect to our engagement in conversation with Muslims as witnesses to Christ rather than as representatives of Christianity. When we witness to what we have experienced with Christ, we are inviting others to respond, like us, to God's invitation into relationship with himself. We are responding to Jesus' invitation in Matthew 5:13 for us to be the "salt of the earth." Though we are small, we are effective. We refuse to find confidence in the "pack mentality," where the salt is in excess and ruins the taste of the food. Yet we are also aware that if we "lose our saltiness" by failing to live out according to the distinctives of God's kingdom, then we might as well be "thrown out and trampled underfoot."

Second, *kerygmatic witness is supra-religious witness that moves us away from the mindset of triumphalistic Christendom*. The traditional mission mindset tends to count gains and losses, like one side engaged in conflict with another. How are we doing with achieving our strategy? What clusters of "unreached peoples" have yet to be conquered? By what year will we have achieved the "great commission?" 2020? 2025? 2050? But isn't this entire way of thinking absurd and futile, given the constant shifts in demographic and cultural realities resulting from mass migration, globalization, social media, and other such variables? Christ-centered supra-religious witness is meek rather than triumphalistic. It

Kerygmatic witness is Christ-centered rather than Christianity-centered—we disengage from the cosmic battle between religions.

is inviting rather than offensive. Like Christ-centeredness, supra-religiousness is disarming as well. As we put away from ourselves the false sense of duty that we ought to be defenders of Christianity and its doctrines, we are able to journey along humbly with our Muslim neighbors as fellow-travelers on a quest for God's light and love. In Matthew 5:14–16, Jesus tells us that if we are his disciples we are the "light of the world." As he clarifies the metaphor, he speaks of a town that cannot be hidden because it is built on a hill (v. 14). He speaks of a lamp that gives its light to everyone in the house because it is set on its stand rather than put under a bowl (v. 15). The imagery conveys the scene of a light that softly illuminates the way on a journey, or gently provides the light needed to discover truth in the dark. One does not get the sense of a strong headlight that bedazzles a passerby. The light that Jesus speaks of, and that must "shine before others" is, according to verse 16, our "good deeds" that lead our companions on the journey to "glorify [y]our Father in heaven." Jesus tells us that when we are "peacemakers" we will be called "children of God" (Matthew 5:9). What better way to give glory to our Father in heaven than by being recognized as his children?

Third, *kerygmatic witness is prophetic and scientifically honest*. Talk of dialogue and peacebuilding can communicate the impression that we are advancing "sweet talking" as an alternative to gospel witness. Dialogue can—and has indeed—often become an exchange of niceties with little implications for the gospel or even interest for people of faith. Kerygmatic dialogue, on the other hand, seeks to engage theologically and to do so on scientifically honest grounds.

While there is not space here to discuss this in great depth, suffice it to say that a kerygmatic approach to Muhammad and the Qur'an opts for a quest for the "historical Muhammad" as an alternative to the usual "Muhammad of faith and tradition." Based on the latest scientific findings in the revisionist school for the study of Islam, the traditional portrait of Muhammad preserved in the official prophetic biography (*Sirat Rasul Allah*), as well as the traditional method for the study of the Qur'an based on *hadith* and *asbab an-nuzul*—"occasions of the revelation"—are no longer viable. A kerygmatic witness is appreciative of Muhammad and the Qur'an because the historical event of their appearance on the world stage is intimately connected with the Judeo-Christian tradition in Arabia in the sixth century. A Christ-centered witness, however, turns down respectfully the notion of Muhammad's prophethood and of the Qur'an as a continuation or fulfillment of the biblical revelation, not because of any disdain for Muhammad and his book, but because of a firm belief in the finality of Christ as God's self-revelation and the achievement of our salvation at the cross.

The kingdom metaphor here may be that of the yeast. It is a tricky metaphor in the New Testament. In Matthew 16:6 and in 1 Corinthians 5:6, the yeast symbolizes false teaching. In Luke 12:1, it symbolizes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. Yet in Matthew 13:31–33, both the yeast and the mustard seed represent a small quantity of good substance that transforms irresistibly and overwhelmingly an entire environment for the greater benefit of all those around. As we seek intellectually to engage with Muslims kerygmatically in search for the truth, we must be aware of the

dangers of false teaching and hypocrisy that we could fall into. But if we are steadfast, these humble seeds of truth could grow into a large tree in whose shade birds of many kinds can find rest and fellowship. The yeast and the mustard seed are kingdom metaphors that speak of the great impact of small ingredients. They invite us to work steadfastly for the common good of our societies.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

(Matthew 5:9) Kerygmatic witness is intentional in its proclamation of the “gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15). Michael Stroope expresses it well:

Witness is not a synonym for *persuasion, argument, or coercion*. Witness runs in two directions, each compounding the other. Witness is both beholding and telling. To *behold* is to witness something that changes one’s existence. *Beholding* is more than seeing with physical eyes; it is to be captured by a vision of that which is revealed (apocalyptic), and thus hopeful and transformative. To *tell* is to do more than recount events with a line of argument or in a dispassionate manner; rather, *telling* is to convey with one’s words and life what has been seen and experienced.⁵

Building peace is more than a set of techniques and more than a methodology. It is part of the beatitudes, placing it at the heart of the life of the kingdom. Peacebuilding is first a way of living with others in community. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews intreats his readers (Hebrews 12:14), “Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Paul does the same in Romans 12:18, encouraging the Romans, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” In Pauline thinking, practicing peaceful living also seems to be connected with what he refers to as the “ministry of reconciliation” in 2 Corinthians 5:18, which was given to us after God reconciled

us to himself through Christ and made us into new creations in Christ (also v. 17). The kingdom call for the children of God to be peacemakers and reconcilers has to come to terms with a long history of conflict between Christianity and Islam. If we are going to engage kerygmatically with hearts, hands, and minds, we need to understand how political conflict has affected the history of theological dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Disentangling Our Witness from a Civilizing Mission

Theologically, we must ponder nearly 1400 years of Christian-Muslim meta-dialogue, strewn with turning points



of political and military conflicts that have perpetually led to persecution. As children of the twenty-first century, heirs of the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, of the rise of al-Qaeda and September 11, of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, of the birth pangs of the “Arab Spring,” of the murderous havoc wreaked by ISIS, it is easy for us to accuse Islam of being a religion of violence and death. But we forget that it was Christian Byzantium that was the blueprint of Islam’s emergence, the model for its expansionist nature and appetite for conquest. Political Christianity was a towering religious expression that all but blocked any alternative pattern for the nascent Islamic movement of the seventh century. Amid

the realities of the time, for Islam to have emerged as a pacifist religious expression would have required a sheer miracle. It was at the intersection of religion and politics that the theological metadialogue between Christianity and Islam was born, and the persisting formulation of our theological relationship is an enduring witness to this politicized encounter.

The Eastward Crusades of the eleventh century and the Westward Reconquista, that grew in vigor around the same period and extended up to the end of the fifteenth century, triggered a shift and turning point in the Christian-Muslim theological discourse that reoriented the conversation from text-based exegesis to eisegetical proof-texting. The chief example of this shift occurred in the argument of *tabrif*, the Muslim accusation that Jews and Christians had corrupted their scriptures beyond repair. The Qur’an itself speaks of *tabrif* in the sense of taking words out of their intended context.⁶ Early Muslim interpreters accused Jews and Christians of committing *tabrif al-ma’na*—“corruption of meaning”—in other words, of misinterpreting their scriptures. It is in this way that they explained the emergence of doctrines incompatible with reason—according to their own patterns of reasoning, from otherwise divinely inspired texts. But by the time of the great conflicts of the eleventh century, Muslim exegetes had taken to distinguishing between *tabrif al-ma’na* and *tabrif al-lafz*—“corruption of meaning” and “corruption of text.” In this matrix, the accusation of the falsification of the biblical text was born.

As this argument reached a deadlock at the heart of conflict, so the witness of the church today needs to begin with the task of disentangling the Bible from our militant missions. Using what I call “legitimate hermeneutics,” in my book *Sacred Misinterpretation*,⁷ we need to enter the world of Muslim Qur’anic

exegesis to find precedent within the Muslim tradition for alternative ways that Muslims have considered and used the Judeo-Christian scriptures. I have demonstrated how, long before the argument came to a deadlock in the eleventh century, Muslim historians and theologians, such as al-Ya'qubi and Ibn Qutayba (both 9th century), used the Bible simply as a reliable source of historical information about biblical events and about Jesus. Ibn Qutayba, a well-respected theologian and hadith collector and critic of the ninth century, stood out in his use of gospel verses to determine the veracity of Muslim hadith traditions. Others, such as Imam al-Qasim ar-Rassi, the ninth-century founder of the Yemeni branch of the Zaydiyya movement, cited extensively from the Bible in his dialectical work against Christians, but never with the purpose of discrediting the text. He Islamized certain words, such as Father and Son, and sometimes altered anthropomorphical language, but he did so to make the text more palatable to a Muslim reader as a means of salvaging the text rather than to discredit it. The same phenomenon can be observed in al-Ya'qubi as well. Historically, Muslims did not start out their engagement with Christians by discrediting their scriptures. It was political conflict that brought us to this deadlock.

The European colonization of the majority of the Muslim world, beginning in the fifteenth century, was characterized by the exploitation of land, resources, and people. The fact that this colonial enterprise was undertaken by countries that purported to be Christian, and that it was coupled with an enthusiastic missionary movement, led to a great disillusionment with Christianity among the colonized. In the post-colonial era of the early twentieth century, Muslim intellectuals and reformers from previously-colonized nations struggled between the desire to modernize and industrialize, and the desire to hold on to tradition. They were drawn to the model that they had

Historically, Muslims did not start out by discrediting the Christian scriptures. It was political conflict that brought us to this deadlock.

experienced under the Europeans, yet they struggled with a sense of having been robbed of their own culture and religion by the hegemonic expression of Christianity that had accompanied the colonial endeavor. The conflict between cultures and civilizations developed into a conflict between opposing religions and their god. The rise of Zionism that led to the establishment of the State of Israel by the middle of the twentieth century did nothing to alleviate this sense that a cosmic battle was raging in the realm of the divine.

Our engagement with Islam today on questions of God's nature and attributes, and on the Trinity and the incarnation, necessitates that we disentangle God from our "civilizing" mission. It is hard to affirm a Triune God who dwells in eternal loving communion, whose desire to enter our world expressed itself supremely through the incarnation of the eternal Son in Jesus Christ, and whose self-giving love manifested itself extravagantly at the cross, when our history of missions has been so complicit with the subjugation of other human beings and the demonstration of such flagrant abuse of power. It will take more than a continued affirmation of propositional truths to convince Muslims that we serve a loving God who desires to embrace them and invite them into his heavenly kingdom.

Just as the role of the church today must consist in disentangling God from our "civilizing" mission, we must perhaps as well disentangle Christ from our apologetic mission. Our primary approach to dialogue has traditionally been the affirmation of propositional truths, about the Trinity and Christ's divinity, the incarnation and the cross. But what if we focused instead on the significance of "presence" and solidarity in suffering?

Will this sort of witness to "God with us" not be more powerful? Should not our propositional apologetics and dialectics give way to an incarnational life? What if our primary mode of living were love of friend and foe, to the point of being willing to lay down our life for them? Will this not be a more effective testimony to the cross as the expression of God's eternal act of self-giving? What if this Christlike life became the foundation of our relationships and conversations, replacing the smart and often dispassionate theological arguments, and what if this became the principal window into the nature of the Divine? Our multi-faith and multi-layered communities today beckon us to approach dialogue from the angle of invested lives that lead to understanding, rather than from the starting point of propositional truths that seek rhetorical triumph.⁸

As Christians and Muslims, we are heirs of a history of war and religious violence. When we ponder the violent expressions of Islam which have manifested over the past decades, we would do well to realize quite frighteningly that we are looking at ourselves and our own history in the mirror. We are conceited if we pat ourselves on the back in the belief that the Christianity we have proclaimed and identified with throughout much of our history can offer any hope for a violent and desperate world. The only hope for a redemptive witness to Christ will begin with a disentangling of Muhammad and the Qur'an from our essentializing mission. When we lump Islam altogether under the aegis of violence and as an anti-Christ manifestation, we further deepen the chasm in our increasingly interconnected multifaith societies.

A Mature Witness Will Derive from a Mature Biblical Theology of Islam

Our understanding of Islam has tended to derive from intuitive notions acquired through personal experiences, through the populist discourse that dominates our media and many of our church pulpits, and through popular writings with an essentializing agenda. It suits us to perpetuate a one-sided and often simplistic understanding of Islam. Just as the demonization of a certain ethnic group is a useful tool of propaganda in the hands of a government, that precedes the conquest and subjugation of a population through war, so is the wholesale demonization of Islam and Muslims too often used as a polemical tool in pre-evangelism. The word “polemics” comes from Greek *polemos*, meaning “war” and “combat.” Some of our evangelistic methods flirt too closely with the methods of war. Our mission to Muslims, when it falls into the trap of essentialism, is often impulsive rather than thoughtful. And it results in methods that are often driven by pragmatism rather than theology.

The outcome is readily observed in three of the greatest controversies about mission methodologies currently raging in missionary circles: high-context Bible translation, the Insider Movement as an approach to church planting, and the legitimacy of dialogue as a vehicle for witness. Essentialists who demonize Islam wholesale tend to oppose vehemently all three approaches. If you view Muhammad as an anti-Christ figure who wrote a book with the intent of bringing down Judaism and Christianity, then you will naturally oppose the introduction of Qur’anic terminology into Bible translations. You will consider that the only path to true conversion is for a Muslim to renounce Islam as a Satanic trap, and will disciple them through

maximum extraction. And you will not want to touch interfaith dialogue with a six-foot pole. But if for a moment you consider that Muhammad may have belonged to a Judeo-Christian sect, who desired to reproduce the Judeo-Christian scriptures in a “clear Arabic tongue” as a sort of Qur’anic Midrashist,⁹ then you might consider it natural to integrate Qur’anic terms and concepts into your Bible translation. You may view the purpose of evangelism as conversion to Christ rather than to Christianity; discipleship as a process of journeying with a Muslim as they begin to reinterpret their tradition in light of the resurrected Christ. And you may realize



that dialogue and witness ought to be the two sides of an indivisible coin: *kerygma* and dialogue manifested through kerygmatic dialogue and dialogical kerygma.

The witness of the church today, I am convinced, needs to be rooted in the development of a thoughtful biblical theology of Islam, of the Qur’an, of Muhammad, and of Muslims. Outside a sophisticated, scientifically critical, intellectually honest, prophetically incisive, relationally hopeful, and biblically faithful treatment of Islam, our witness to Muslims will remain devoid of the meek and liberating power of Christ. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, Kindle Edition, 2017), 374.

² Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (London-New York: HarperCollins e-books, 2008), 250, quoting from Andrew G. Bostom, ed., *The Legacy of Jihad* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005), 611 (emphasis by Jenkins).

³ See especially one of Peter Brown’s earlier pieces on the subject, “The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.

⁴ Martin Accad, “Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach,” in *Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness among Muslims: Essays in Honor of J. Dudley Woodberry*, ed. Evelyne A. Reisacher (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2012), 38.

⁵ Stroope, *Transcending Mission*, 371.

⁶ Four verses in the Qur’an contain the verb *harrafa*: al-Baqara 2:75, an-Nisa’ 4:46, and al-Ma’ida 5:13 and 41.

⁷ Martin Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), Chapter 2.

⁸ These last lines are a paraphrase of a blog piece I wrote on May 5, 2016, “Jesus, Muslims and the Qur’an: in search for KERYGMATIC peacebuilding,” IMES blog (republished August 29, 2019).

⁹ The Midrashim (plural of Midrash) were expanded commentaries on the Torah, written by Jewish religious scholars, integrating extensive oral traditions with the text of scriptures.

Article Response

A Response to Martin Accad

by Harley Talman

Thank you, Martin for these enlightening and challenging thoughts for reaching across the Muslim-Christian divide. In my brief response I will highlight key points that I appreciate, pose a few questions and offer a small contribution of my own.

You have daringly contrasted Christendom with Christianity and Christianity with the kingdom of God, calling us to rejoice at the death of Christendom (which united Christianity with political and military power). I suspect you shocked some with your assertion that mission must even dispense with Christianity itself—at least when its mission is still complicit in colonialism, and when we make it a system of propositional doctrines which many Christians have substituted for the Kingdom of God.

The kingdom involves the way of life taught by Jesus, a life submitted to the authority of the Messiah. Many Christians are living the life of the kingdom, but many are not. On the other hand, others are living their lives with Christ as king, beyond the borders of Christianity.

Counter to mainstream evangelical mission, you boldly call for contemporary kerygmatic witness to put dialogue and peace-making back on the stage of inter-faith relations. Christianity can no longer be the king that we as Christian soldiers defend in the battle of religions. Instead, meek missionaries must offer supra-religious witness to Muslim pilgrims on their journey to the light of the world. But our humble witness must also be prophetic and academically honest.

As it relates to Muhammad and the Qur'an, I completely agree that the findings of current scholarship require us to reject the Muhammad of Islamic tradition that was based on unreliable Muslim biographies. But I have some questions:

1. Knowing how strongly Bible-believing Christians reacted to liberal scholars' rejection of the Jesus of the gospels in their quest for the "historical Jesus," might we expect Muslims to react even more negatively to our search for the "historical Muhammad"?¹
2. How can kerygmatic witness proclaim such a radical and offensive (to Muslims) truth in peace-making dialogue?
3. Have you been successful in doing this? If so, then what guidance can you offer us?

I concur that we should respect the "historical Muhammad" and the Qur'an due to their close connection to Judeo-Christian tradition in Arabia, and that we must respectfully disagree with Muslims that Muhammad and the Qur'an are a direct continuation or a fulfillment of biblical revelation. However, could we not take our stand upon what the Qur'an itself claims—that it should be interpreted as a *confirmation* of biblical revelation in an Arabic language (46:12)? Though this stands in stark contrast to the attitude that prevails among Muslims today, your outstanding monograph, *Sacred Misinterpretation*,² provides clear evidence that for four centuries Muslim scholars overwhelmingly approached the Bible as a reliable, uncorrupted text.

You demonstrate how political conflict led to theological enmity. Thank you for bringing to light that the political Christianity of the Byzantine Empire provided the template that shaped Muhammad's monotheistic movement into a competing political empire under an imperial religious system.

I also heartedly agree that dialogical focus on propositional truths about contested doctrines must shift to demonstration of incarnational, self-giving love. I suggest that we go even further by inviting Muslims to participate with us in expressing such love through joint service projects.

And while I unreservedly agree with the need for nonverbal demonstration of love, words are still needed. However, I would advocate that our propositional discussions focus on Jesus' emphasis in the great commission, recorded in Matthew, to "teach them to obey all that I commanded you." Instead of dialogue dominated by doctrinal discussions of the reliability of the Bible, the Trinity, or the deity of Christ, let us direct our attention to examining the teachings of Jesus, asking our Muslim friends:

- What did Jesus teach? How should it impact our own faith communities?
- Which of his commands do our two communities need to obey in our relations with each other?

It is through obeying Jesus' commands that Muslims can come to know who he really is. In John 14:21 Jesus promised, "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and will *reveal* myself to him."

Finally, I support your call for the development of a biblical theology of Islam, escaping the trap of essentialist views of Islam (as violent, demonic or of the anti-Christ), and instead considering the evidence for Muhammad belonging to a Jewish-Christian sect, or for his founding an ecumenical movement of monotheists that was later exploited by political rulers to unite the Arab empire under an imperial religion (just like Byzantine Christianity).

Biblical theologies that sanction Muslim conversion to Christ (as opposed to Christianity) can foster correction of the Islamic tradition to conform it to the revelatory light of Christ and the Bible rather than demanding its destruction.

Biblical theologies such as you call for may sanction Muslim conversion to Christ (as opposed to Christianity). They could foster correction of the Islamic tradition to conform it to the revelatory light of Christ and the Bible, rather than demanding its destruction. Such theologies will find Muslim friends, such as Abdullah Galadari, whose *Qur'anic Hermeneutics* accepts the Christology of the gospel of John.³

I say “Amen!” to Martin’s calling us to develop a biblical theology of the Qur’an, Muhammad and Muslims. But let us first count the cost. As Martin well knows, such attempts will be strongly criticized or attacked by others—if not by some from the Muslim community, then by others in the body of Christ. Martin reminds us: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” But it is the peacemaking sons of God who also experience the final beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” May we be so blessed. **IJFM**

Harley Talman has worked with Muslims for over 35 years, including two decades in the Arab world and Africa, during which he was involved in church planting, theological education, and humanitarian aid. Talman holds a ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary and a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary. He presently teaches Islamic studies at a graduate school.

Endnotes

¹ Martin later responded privately to my questions regarding discussing the “historical Muhammad” with Muslims. He indicated that it would not be well received, but that we must humbly speak the truth in love.

² Martin Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

³ Abdullah Galadari, *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Between Science, History, and the Bible* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018)

Cameron Townsend and the Radicalization of the Faith Mission Paradigm

by Boone Aldridge

The global realities of our post-colonial 21st century are demanding changes in Christian mission structure and identity. The institutional tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions can appear obscure, but suddenly become vivid when grounded in the personality and entrepreneurial genius of a mission founder. The drama becomes relevant and can stimulate creativity with our mission institutions today. Such is the case with the 20th century missionary pioneer, William Cameron Townsend, the co-founder of the dual missionary organization comprised of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Wycliffe Bible Translators (SIL-WBT).¹ He looked to break down barriers in reaching the linguistically isolated indigenous peoples of the world. The radical institutional change he introduced broke with some aspects of a modern faith mission paradigm while carrying other features to their logical conclusion.

An Emerging Vision

Townsend began his missionary career with the Central American Mission in Guatemala, but his initial tenure with the mission from 1918 to 1933 was an uneasy one. Contrary to the mission's policy of evangelizing in Spanish, Townsend insisted that Guatemala's indigenous peoples should be reached with the gospel in their own languages. In part, his argument rested on the firm belief that Guatemala's indigenous inhabitants would never achieve religious, social, and economic equality with the dominant Spanish-speaking *Ladinos* until they were instilled with some measure of respect for their own languages and cultures.² Toward this end, and with little official mission support, Townsend initiated indigenous education projects and translated the New Testament into Kaqchikel. When he completed the translation in 1932, the leadership of the mission pressed him to settle down and consolidate the work he had begun among the Kaqchikels. With visions of Bible translation dancing in his head, Townsend instead resigned from Central American Mission in 1933.

Editor's Note: This paper was presented at the International Society for Frontier Missiology in September 2019 under the theme, "Reimagining Frontier Mission." His careful historiography is developed more fully in his recent book, For the Gospel's Sake: The Rise of the Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2018).

Boone Aldridge joined Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International in 1996, and after linguistic studies was assigned to the Togo-Benin Branch of SIL in 1999 as a language surveyor (dialect studies). In 2002 he was assigned to SIL Africa Area as a mission researcher, and from 2008 to 2012 pursued doctoral studies under David Bebbington at the University of Stirling, Scotland. In 2013, he was assigned the position of SIL corporate historian.

Following his resignation, Townsend embarked on a two-fold mission. First, he made an exploratory survey into Mexico, where he hoped to undertake Bible translation and social uplift projects among that nation's indigenous peoples. Second, in 1934, he established Camp Wycliffe, a summer course to train missionary-translators in the relatively new science of structural linguistics. In pursuing these overlapping aims, Townsend rewrote the book on what it meant to be a faith missionary.

And what did it mean to be a modern era missionary anyway? The language of mission: missionary, missions, missional, are terms that entered into common usage during the European expansion of Christianity, and are thus, in our post-colonial age, freighted with legacies of the past: crusades, colonialism, occupation, and center-periphery, to name but a few. Missiologist Michael Stroope has recently offered a thorough analysis and critique of the language of mission and its historical baggage. He has argued that the time has come to transcend the language of mission altogether. Stroope contends that the language of "mission" has been read into both the biblical and historical contexts "in order to accommodate a variety of agendas and to support a particular version of church history."³ We are, as it were, enveloped within a conceptual paradigm that fails to do justice to the globalized realities of the twenty-first century. However, the language of mission retains a powerful grip on the imagination. "For many Christians," Stroope points out,

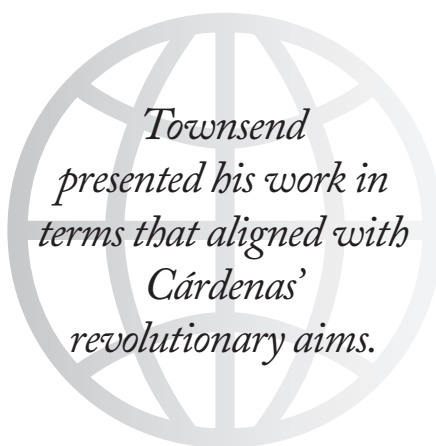
mission language is emotionally charged and thus gives definition to how they feel about their place in the world... To critique the term raises uncomfortable questions about personal identity and life purpose.⁴

Cameron Townsend, as we will see, ran headlong into this very problem. The language and conceptual notions of mission were impediments to his new venture. He therefore crafted a partial

solution that worked around the problem, and in doing so fundamentally reworked the modern mission paradigm.

Into Revolutionary Mexico

When Cameron Townsend set his sights on Mexico in 1933, the nation barred entry to new missionaries. This posed little obstacle to the enterprising and imaginative Townsend; he simply dropped his missionary identity. In a letter of introduction to Mexican authorities he introduced L. L. Legters—a colleague and SIL's co-founder—as a "lecturer, explorer and humanitarian," and himself as an "ethnologist and educator." He did not deny his religious aims, and proposed what he referred to as the "Mexican Society of Indigenous Translations." This



society would establish a program, he wrote, to "conserve for science a grammar and dictionary of each indigenous language" while also undertaking to "translate the New Testament in each language and publish it in bilingual edition."⁵

By way of some fast talking and the presentation of an old letter from Mexican educator and diplomat Moisés Sáenz, Townsend and Legters were allowed into the country, but only after promising not to preach. Legters, an inveterate pulpiter, chafed at the restriction and soon returned to the US. Townsend stayed on and fell into the company of sociologist and social activist Frank Tannenbaum, who was suspected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation of associating with a

"red cohort" of leftist intellectuals in Mexico.⁶ The two men struck up a friendship, and Tannenbaum provided his new acquaintance with a note of introduction to Mexico's director of rural education, Rafael Ramírez, thus paving the way for Townsend to tour the country inspecting its educational system for several months.⁷

Townsend eventually convinced key Mexican authorities, such as Ramírez, that his overall intentions aligned with at least some of their revolutionary goals: undermining Roman Catholicism, developing indigenous languages, educating the nation's indigenous peoples, and integrating these people into mainstream society. Eschewing the classical elements of the missionary vocation, such as preaching, baptizing converts, and founding churches, Townsend set himself up in the village of Tetelcingo as a linguist and community developer. He also began learning the language in anticipation of translating the New Testament into a dialect of Aztec.

When Mexico's President Lázaro Cárdenas paid Townsend an unexpected visit in 1936, he was immediately impressed with the American's work, which reflected his own practical concern for Mexico's rural population. With much in common, the two men became friends. Townsend convinced his new benefactor that putting the Bible into the peasants' hands and teaching them to read it would tend to eliminate vice and superstition, while at the same time undercutting Catholicism's influence. To wit, Townsend presented his work in terms that aligned with Cárdenas' revolutionary aims. Following their meeting, Townsend wrote the president that

before having the pleasure of knowing you, I loved and admired the revolutionary work of Mexico, now, upon knowing its highest representative personally I feel more intimately identified with her and more resolved and determined in service.⁸

Townsend proved his sentiment by stumping for Cárdenas in America after the president nationalized the assets of US oil companies operating in Mexico. A lasting friendship was forged between these two men, evidenced by Cárdenas serving as Townsend's best man at his second marriage in 1946, after the death of first wife.

Townsend's relationship with Cárdenas opened the way for him to channel his young Camp Wycliffe graduates into Mexico, where they engaged in linguistic research, carried out language and community development projects, and produced vernacular New Testament translations. And, following Townsend's precedent, they did not preach, baptize converts, or found churches under SIL's control. Thus, rather than entering Mexico as a classical faith mission, Townsend instead conformed his mission to Mexico's socio-political context in order to gain access to the indigenous population.

The Linguistic Approach

Back in North America, rural Arkansas to be exact, Townsend's upstart summer linguistic school proved a roaring success. By 1942, Camp Wycliffe had achieved sufficient academic standing to garner an invitation to partner with the University of Oklahoma at Norman, where it operated until 1988 as an adjunct department on a full credit basis. With the move to Norman, the Camp Wycliffe name was dropped and the school was absorbed into the Summer Institute of Linguistics. But, as we shall see, the Wycliffe name reappeared that same year as the name for an entirely new parallel organization to SIL.

To bolster the scientific credibility of SIL, Townsend encouraged his most outstanding students to expand their linguistic knowledge by pursuing advanced degrees at places such as the University of Michigan, where two of his early recruits, Kenneth Pike

Following Townsend's precedent, his young Camp Wycliffe graduates did not preach, baptize converts, or found churches under SIL's control.

and Eugene Nida, earned doctorates. Both men would go on to make their marks in linguistics and translation respectively. They also saw to it that SIL became a world-class institute of structural linguistics. While North American evangelicals viewed the organization primarily as a Bible translation mission, government administrators and linguistic scholars around the world knew and understood that SIL was much more, that it was also a leading player in the science of structural linguistics.

Of Service to All

As Townsend expanded SIL's operations into South America and beyond, the operating procedures established in Mexico became the guiding principles for the organization's field development. SIL henceforth entered other countries under government contracts as a scientific organization that engaged in language development and community service. Bible translation was of course on the menu, but it was couched in minimalist terms. For example, SIL's contract with Peru called for it to translate books of "high moral value," which was a moniker for Bible translation. Peru's government officials, as well as other Latin American government officials, were not unaware of SIL's religious ambitions; however, it suited their purposes to have SIL's contracts on a scientific basis, rather than on religious grounds, since this would ostensibly deflect criticism that they were sponsoring a Protestant organization at the expense of Roman Catholicism.

If the SIL strategy aimed to lessen the influence of Catholicism, Townsend nonetheless stipulated that SIL was non-sectarian and would therefore serve everyone regardless of their

religious belief or political persuasion. Thus, for example, Roman Catholic priests and nuns and liberal Protestants were admitted to the Institute's linguistic courses at the University of Oklahoma from the late 1940s. In 1958, Townsend said he hoped that SIL would one day have the opportunity to serve Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists, Jews and, as he put it, "everyone."⁹ All of Townsend's efforts in the arena of universal service were, in one way or another, aimed specifically at gaining access to indigenous peoples in order to bring them vernacular translations of the New Testament, while at the same time improving their social standing within the nations in which they resided.

Clearly Townsend's mission was not a typical faith mission, and was thus at odds with its home base, where SIL relied upon the financial support of North American fundamentalists and other conservative evangelicals. This is where the Wycliffe Bible Translators side of the dual organization came into play. Formed in 1942, its purpose was to relate to the organization's North American constituency in ways familiar to churchgoers. In other words, Wycliffe looked and sounded like a typical faith mission. Its publicity focused heavily on Bible translation and the more religious aspects of SIL's work. Likewise it produced films that highlighted the spiritual transformation of indigenous peoples after the New Testament began to circulate in their communities.

The organization's personnel also took advantage of the dual structure. When in North America they presented themselves to the Christian public as Wycliffe missionaries; and when abroad, as linguists or members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

The dual SIL-Wycliffe setup allowed members to accent differing aspects of the total program depending on whom they were addressing.

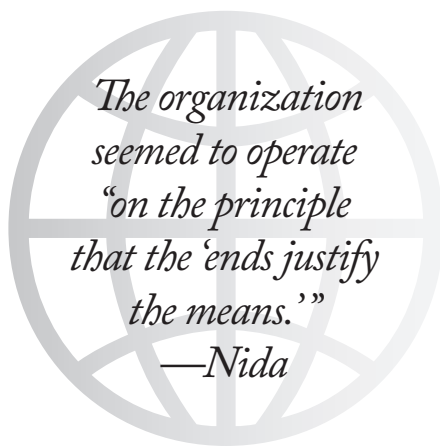
But, the duality could also be a source of deep mental distress for some missionaries, especially those driven to telling the truth at all costs. One of these turned out to be none other than Eugene Nida, one of SIL's top linguists and charter board member. Nida gave as his primary reason for resigning from SIL and Wycliffe in 1953 that he could no longer condone the "degree of misrepresentation" that was entailed in "the explanation of the SIL-WBT program." In the main, he concluded that the organization seemed to operate "on the principle that the 'ends justify the means.'"¹⁰ Others, such as Kenneth Pike, appeared unbothered by the duality, and he simply argued that Wycliffe and SIL were "for *accountability* to two different audiences."¹¹

In any case, the dual-organizational structure provided Townsend just what he needed to pursue his radical vision of Bible translation as a scientific endeavor under the rubric of non-secular service. SIL in Latin America and beyond could legitimately function as a scientific institute—albeit one that engaged in both Bible translation and language development. At home in North America, Wycliffe could publicize the work, raise funds, and recruit candidates among fundamentalists and evangelicals with the usual faith missionary vocabulary familiar to churchgoers. In a word, all the trappings of a faith mission were maintained for the most part at home, but radically altered in practice on the field as needed.

Effects of the Strategy

Having described the general outline of SIL's and Wycliffe's early development, allow me to make some observations. First, by collaborating with governments, Townsend and SIL

practiced what historian Todd Hartch referred to as "submission theology," a strategy "that emphasized submission to rulers as God's agents."¹² SIL not only took the modern nation-state as an artifact of historical development, but deeply involved itself in the development of the states in which it found itself, and this regardless of the political persuasion of the nation's government. Left or Right, SIL was there to serve. Indeed, service could at times be carried so far that it led to SIL fusing with the state. For example, in Peru, SIL's aviation program became so deeply integrated into the state apparatus that it functioned as an arm of the Peruvian military, even to the



point of conducting military transport flights. SIL also had offices at the Department of Education in Lima. The line between SIL and the Peruvian government all but vanished.¹³

Second, SIL also had to live up to the research and language development expectations of the various states it served. Expansion of university connections beyond Norman, Oklahoma, also propelled SIL in a scholarly direction. Without these relationships, it would have been all too easy to lapse into ignoring research and scholarship and instead concentrating only on Bible translation. But SIL was contractually obligated to produce credible scholarship.

In the third place, SIL's wide-ranging linguistic, cultural and humanitarian program widened its understanding of the task beyond evangelization. Kenneth Pike summed this up when he wrote that the "*whole man*, we feel, must be affected by the Gospel—his spirit, intellect, and culture."¹⁴

Put simply, then, the deeper SIL moved into the "service of all" mandate, the greater the dichotomy between the SIL work in foreign parts and the recruiting and publicity efforts of Wycliffe in North America.

Repercussions

In the mid-1950s, some evangelical missionaries began to note that SIL workers were a rather different lot. It was observed that they attended diplomatic functions where liquor was served. Then there were all those monks, nuns, and priests riding around in SIL aircraft. Others remarked that SIL members sometimes seemed to downplay their true identity, referring to themselves as linguists rather than explicitly as missionaries. In 1956, a student reported that Harold Cook, a Moody professor of missions and author of the widely used textbook *Missionary Life and Work*, was criticizing the dual organization's "chameleon-like misrepresentation" in the classroom.¹⁵ Africa Inland Mission's Ralph T. Davis complained to Townsend in 1958 that

I have never been able to be convinced in my own heart that the primary purpose of you and Wycliffe, as such, was the spiritual purpose of your work rather than the scientific.

"Are you fish or fowl?" Davis wanted to know.¹⁶ By 1960, the hue and cry within the conservative faith mission complex became so loud that Wycliffe pulled out of the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association rather than risk ejection.¹⁷

The late 1960s brought new attacks on SIL as anthropologists took up the cause of indigenous peoples. In 1973,

the American anthropologist Laurie Hart castigated SIL in an article entitled “Story of the Wycliffe Translators: Pacifying the Last Frontiers.”¹⁸ Among a litany of other charges, Hart accused SIL of abetting internal colonialism. She argued that it was the organization’s strategy to place indigenous peoples into a “decultured” state so that they could be reconstituted as citizens of the dominant culture. The first book-length condemnation of SIL-WBT arrived on the scene in 1981 under the title *Is God an American?* This was a collection of essays by North American and European anthropologists accusing SIL of everything from ethnocide to being a front for the CIA. In 1982, David Stoll, who made something of a career out of criticizing SIL, published a book-length analysis of SIL-WBT entitled *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?* Stoll was particularly exercised over the dual strategy, referring to it as “a versatile fiction.”¹⁹

Weathering the Storm

Despite all the criticisms of Christian fundamentalists, the unrelenting denunciations of secular anthropologists and linguists—not to mention threats of expulsion from various countries—these controversies did little permanent damage to SIL and Wycliffe in the long run. Why was this the case? I suggest that it was, at least in part, a function of the dual-organizational structure, and its practical outworking in varied contexts.

First, a look at Wycliffe in North America. As already noted, SIL members were also Wycliffe missionaries. Thus, in North America, they faced their evangelical supporters as missionaries and Bible translators. Their sponsoring churches and supporters knew and trusted them as individuals and as Wycliffe missionaries. Therefore, whatever reverberations there were about SIL’s field work could usually be allayed by individual missionaries communicating with their constituencies.

Then a delegation of twenty-five indigenous leaders came to the Peruvian president with a petition of 1500 signatories pleading SIL’s case.

Moreover, the Wycliffe brand carried weight. Wycliffe corporate publicity, always on the cutting edge of innovation, was very effective in presenting the fieldwork of SIL (aspects of which could go unmentioned when necessary) to the evangelical public.

And there is the very real fact that the evangelical public was probably more entertained by films and stories of Amazonian “savages” and “cannibals” than they were concerned by interagency politics and infighting. Indeed, Wycliffe went so far as to bring a former head-hunting chief from Peru, Chief Tariri Nochomata, to tour America in the early 1960s. Nochomata was made famous by the Wycliffe pavilion at the New York World’s Fair, where a giant mural violently and graphically portrayed his transition from “savage to citizen” under the organization’s tutelage.²⁰ The mural was so gruesome that fair officials at first questioned putting it on display.²¹

To sum up then: Wycliffe’s publicity was probably far more interesting to churchgoers than any reported SIL irregularities trumpeted about by partisan fundamentalists.

What about SIL? How did it survive the sustained criticisms of leftists at home and abroad? In the first place, through its strategy of “service to all,” SIL had made itself all but essential in many underdeveloped nations. This had been Townsend’s aim all along, and it worked. He told the SIL board in 1953, speaking of Peru, that he wanted to make SIL “seem indispensable . . . to the Government.” “I knew,” he wrote, “that if people got to look upon us as indispensable it would be practically impossible for anybody who opposed us to cause us trouble.” And he then went on to report that

it is just a little embarrassing to Peruvians for us to have an air service that

goes where the Peruvian Air Force doesn’t go, and has won a better reputation for safety.²²

Across an entire range of services from aviation to language development to education, SIL was providing badly needed and widely appreciated goods and services to the nations in which it worked.

Likewise, the indigenous communities in which SIL worked often valued the organization’s efforts to help them. In the mid-1970s, leftists in Peru seemed to have finally effected the ejection of SIL from the country. But SIL had many powerful friends. Dozens of leading figures: politicians, lawyers, businessmen, generals, admirals, academics, and writers—including the renowned Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa—published a defense of SIL in Lima’s two leading papers. Then came a delegation of twenty-five indigenous leaders knocking on the Peruvian president’s door with a petition in hand, one with no fewer than 1500 signatories pleading SIL’s case. With such resounding approval for the organization from both ends of the social strata, SIL’s contract was renewed.²³ A few years later these events were reprised in Ecuador, only this time between 5000 and 6000 indigenous people made their way to the Ecuadorian Congress in support of SIL.²⁴

The SIL-Wycliffe dual-organization was replete with paradoxes. What with Wycliffe and its classical missionary publicity—including talk of cannibals and savages transformed by the gospel on one side, and the deep appreciation and affirmation of indigenous cultures signified by SIL’s language development and social concern on the other, it is no wonder that the organization came under fire. But the fact that SIL

was meeting real needs around the world made it difficult to dislodge or demolish. And it was producing translated scriptures, thus making good on the main goal emphasized by Wycliffe in its publicity. Depending on the public, the message shifted, and there was certainly some semantic ingenuity going on at times. However, on the whole, the goods promised were delivered.

For some evidence of this we can turn to David Stoll, perhaps SIL-Wycliffe's most vocal yet astute critic. Stoll eventually softened his criticism of the 1970s and 1980s after observing indigenous responses to SIL in Latin America. By the mid-1990s, he had concluded that SIL's strategies—and even its practice of the so called “submission theology”—were probably appropriate given the context within which it worked. “To protect its government contracts,” Stoll wrote,

the SIL adopted the policy of never criticizing host governments, no matter how they were treating the population under their control. Still, it must be acknowledged that the docile attitude of SIL missionaries was not necessarily a bad thing. By keeping their mouths shut, they could sometimes give hard-pressed native people medicine and schools they would otherwise not have had, not to mention the Bible translations that some have appreciated.

He also noted that SIL's deep involvement in indigenous communities could save lives. “In other cases,” he wrote,

events could have taken an even worse turn without the missionary linguists. Consider the Huaorani in Ecuador, whom the SIL pacified just ahead of advancing oil teams—and who otherwise could easily have been bombed by the national air force.²⁵

The more mature David Stoll of the 1990s was clearly seeing SIL from a different angle of vision than he had in the overheated 1970s.

On the other hand, he lamented the fact that the organization seemingly

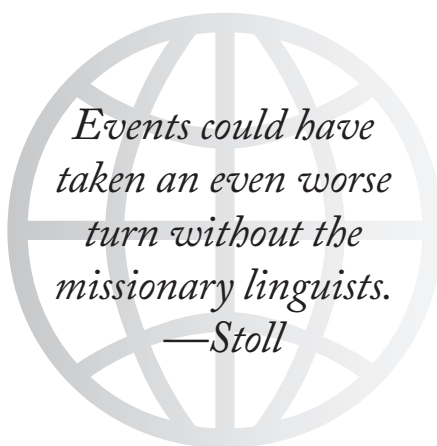
tarnished its own reputation with its semantic prevarications. “Unfortunately,” Stoll noted,

the SIL itself had contributed to the confusion over its work. As a matter of policy, the group had long obfuscated the fact that aside from being a linguistic research organization it was also an evangelical Protestant mission.²⁶

Although Stoll was given to overstating the degree to which the organization muddied the waters, there was at least some measure of truth to his assertion.

Conclusion

The central problem was that the language of mission and its connotations,



as understood by North American evangelicals, did not fit the SIL paradigm created by Cameron Townsend in Latin America.

The demands of Bible translation; the demands of the scientific and government relations strategies; and the demands of service to all; taken together, all this was simply too far removed from American evangelical experience for easy explanation. Rather than undertake the probably impossible task of educating American churchgoers in all the ways of SIL, it was far easier and more convenient to create Wycliffe and maintain all the vocabulary and machinery of the classical faith mission.

Whatever the merits or flaws of the dual-organizational structure, it was the brainchild of Cameron Townsend. And, it was a key in the success of his mission. It must not be thought, however, that it came about through studied reflection on first principles. Townsend was utterly pragmatic. He saw a crying need to reach indigenous peoples with the gospel in their own language, and he insisted that they should have the same dignity and benefits enjoyed by their fellow citizens. It was the Mexican context—and even the ideals of the Revolution—that also did much to shape his approach to mission. He simply cast aside what did not work and adapted, where and when necessary to obtain his goals. And SIL-WBT was simply following Townsend's path-breaking effort to overcome the obstacles of established tradition. “I yearn,” he once wrote,

for other organizations to begin to break loose from the time-honored shackles of churchianity and become all things to all men for the Gospel's sake.²⁷

I suggest that the SIL-Wycliffe experiment provides an excellent case study for examining the problem of modern missions and the language of mission that Mike Stroope has brought to light for us. Perhaps the SIL-Wycliffe experiment also prefigures the many challenges that transcending mission might entail.

But it also suggests that the modern era mission—at least in some respects—can coexist with pilgrim witness. In many places where SIL members served on the ground, they were not really functioning as missionaries in the typical sense.

Translators spent many years simply learning the language and the culture of the people, functioning mostly as faithful witnesses and giving testimony to the reality of Christ Jesus through love and service. Translating was also done in community, not usually as an outside imposition. There were no

pulpits or sermons, no crusades, and no extension of western ecclesiastical structures. When Wycliffe missionaries dropped their missionary identity at the border to become SIL members or translators, it was in large degree appropriate. One can argue the ethics of this transformation—and it was debated inside and outside the organization for decades—but the shift of language was more than semantic. There were real fundamental shifts in perspective and approach.

Nevertheless, in Michael Stroope's sense, the SIL-Wycliffe experiment certainly had "mission" written all over it. Indeed, in some ways it represented the ultimate expression of "modern era mission," or what Andrew Walls called "Missions Incorporated." Of course, the degree to which the specialized craft of Bible translation calls for this kind of programmatic structure can be debated, but the highly-specialized task of scriptural translation would be very difficult without the mission superstructure to support it.

To sum up, then, the very fact that SIL-Wycliffe transcended mission in some areas, functioned as a classical modern mission in others, and sometimes went entirely outside any known paradigm, is what makes for a fascinating case study. The SIL-Wycliffe experiment to reach the least of these with the gospel—and to give them both dignity and a leg up in this world—is a compelling story.

And, no matter what one might conclude about the overall program, this unique approach did pave the way for pilgrim witness in otherwise inaccessible communities, where indigenous peoples were brought into deep and direct engagement with the scriptures in their own languages, after which they often came to know their creator, and were transformed by Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. **IJFM**

One can argue the ethics of this transformation—when Wycliffe missionaries dropped their missionary identity at the border.

Endnotes

¹ The hyphenated "SIL-WBT" acronym refers to the dual organization in a historical sense. The two organizations are today legally and structurally separate entities with their own respective leadership.

² The term *Ladino* is derived from 'latino' and usually refers to the mestizo or hispanicized population. The demonym *Ladino* came into use during the colonial era and referred to the Spanish speaking population that did not belong to the colonial elite of *Peninsulares* or *Criollos*, nor to the indigenous peoples.

³ Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downersgrove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 27.

⁴ Stroope, *Transcending Mission*, 23.

⁵ Cameron Townsend to Al. C. Lic. José M. Soto, official mayor, Secretaría Gobernación, 6 October 1933, Townsend Archives (TA), Waxhaw, North Carolina, TA 2077, translation by William Lawrence Svelmoe, *A New Vision for Missions: William Cameron Townsend, the Wycliffe Bible Translators, and the Culture of Early Evangelical Faith Missions, 1896–1945* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 241–42.

⁶ Cameron Townsend to Elvira Townsend, 10 December 1933, TA 1718; 13 December 1933, p. 2, TA 1716; 20 December 1933, p. 3, TA 1717; quotation from Charles A. Hale, "Frank Tannenbaum and the Mexican Revolution," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 75, no. 2 (May 1995): 238.

⁷ Cameron Townsend to Elvira Townsend, 20 December 1933, p. 2, TA 1716.

⁸ Cameron Townsend to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 29 January 1936, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Fondo Lázaro Cárdenas, quoted in Svelmoe, *A New Vision for Missions*, 270.

⁹ Cameron Townsend to R. J. Reinmiller, Vice President, Gospel Missionary Union, 6 July 1958, TA 14681.

¹⁰ Eugene Nida to Wycliffe Bible Translators board of directors, 9 September 1953, pp. 1–2, TA 9256.

¹¹ Kenneth L. Pike, explanation of the dual organization to an unidentified inquiry, n.d., TA 42517, emphasis in the original.

¹² Todd Hartch, *Missionaries of the State: The Summer Institute of Linguistics, State Formation, and Indigenous Mexico, 1935–1985* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 47.

¹³ Boone Aldridge, *For the Gospel's Sake: The Rise of the Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2018), 121–125, 129–142.

¹⁴ Kenneth L. Pike, "IFMA Issue," Work Paper VI.1, September 1959, SIL Mexico Branch Archive, Catalina, Arizona.

¹⁵ George Cowan to Cameron Townsend, 14 December 1957, p. 2, TA 12660; quotation from John W. Newman to Robert William Wyatt, 10 December 1957, TA 13681.

¹⁶ Ralph T. Davis to Cameron Townsend, 3 November 1958, pp. 1–2, TA 15024.

¹⁷ The organization's membership in the IFMA was formally with Wycliffe, the specifically religious side of the organization.

¹⁸ Laurie Hart, "Story of the Wycliffe Translators: Pacifying the Last Frontiers," *Latin America and Empire Report* 7, no. 10 (December 1973): 16–31.

¹⁹ David Stoll, *Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire? The Wycliffe Bible Translators in Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Cultural Survival, 1982), 12.

²⁰ "From Savage to Citizen," brochure of Wycliffe Bible Translators Pavilion of 2000 Tribes, New York World's Fair, 1964–1965, copy in author's possession.

²¹ C. W. Bendigo, "Headhunting Today Depicted at NY Fair," news release, c. 1964, p. 2, copy in author's possession.

²² Cameron Townsend to Wycliffe and SIL board of directors, 20 March 1953, p. 1, TA 9027.

²³ Aldridge, *For the Gospel's Sake*, 215–217.

²⁴ Kathryn T. Long, *God in the Rainforest: A Tale of Martyrdom & Redemption in Amazonian Ecuador* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 264–265.

²⁵ David Stoll, "Missionaries as Foreign Agents," *American Anthropologist* 98, no. 3 (September 1996): 637.

²⁶ Stoll, "Missionaries as Foreign Agents," 636.

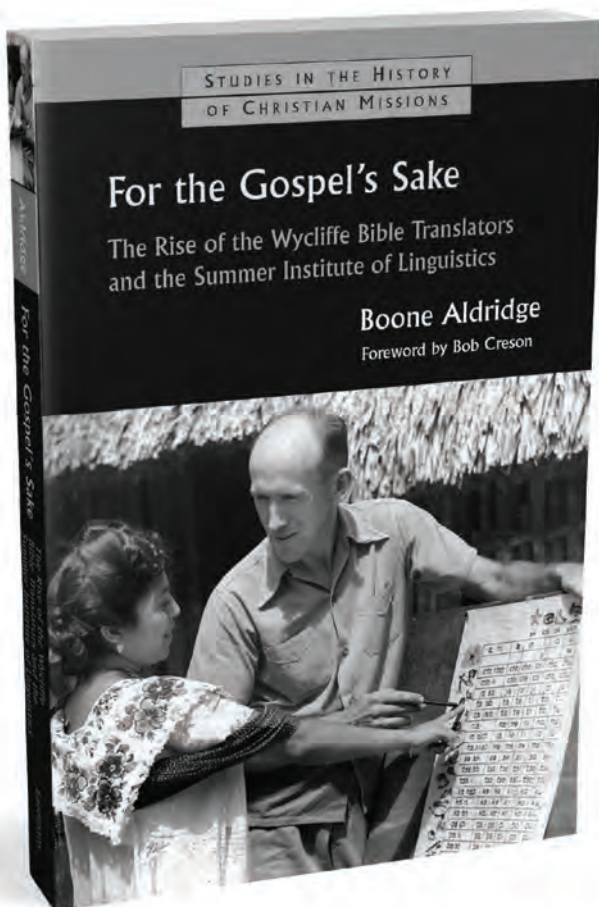
²⁷ Cameron Townsend to Philip E. Howard, Jr., et. al., "Discussion of the Wycliffe Policy of Service," March 1956, p. 1, TA 12104.

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Reimagining Frontier Mission

Moving Beyond: Frontier Missions in Our Postcolonial World

by Bradford Greer

Editorial note: This article was first presented to the faculty and student body of Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY.

Pietism mixed with the freedom to innovate has been the strength of the evangelical experiment both here in the US and in the global missions movement. For 129 years the Asbury alumni have featured these two characteristics in their own worldwide influence. It is indeed an honor and a privilege to address you today, and to try to supplement this institution's formative influence on both Christian piety and mission innovation. Thank you, Dr. Okersson, Dr. Kima and Dr. Sam for this opportunity to address your student body.

I know that "pietism" and "innovation" are words that can raise eyebrows. There have been plenty of bad innovations in missions over the years, drawn largely from methods and strategies that reflect corporate cultures more than they do the kingdom of God. In contrast, the innovations I am addressing today are simply those of being open and responsive to the Spirit's working in new, unanticipated ways.

By pietism, I mean experiencing, knowing, and meaningfully walking with the Lord; in other words, being filled with and led by the Spirit in alignment with God's Word. Our faith is not merely a set of beliefs that we need to articulate accurately (although it is important to know what we believe); it is fundamentally living in the presence of God and allowing him to work in and through us, blessing us, and making us a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

Pietism shapes Asbury and is an integral part of your history. In fact, Asbury was the center of two significant moves of God during my own lifetime, one in 1970 and another in the mid-1990s. But Asbury has experienced quite a number of powerful moves of God over its history.

Innovation is also an integral part of your history. One of your alumni, J. Waskom Pickett, was a heavyweight in missions from 1920 to 1960. His friend, colleague, and fellow Asbury alumnus, E. Stanley Jones, is more well-known, but Waskom Pickett was also highly innovative and very influential.

Bradford Greer (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) has been working in Islamic contexts for over twenty years.

His innovation was seen in his openness and responsiveness to what God was doing among the Dalits in his area of India. One of your seminary graduates, Arthur McPhee, who has served on your faculty, did his PhD dissertation on Pickett and that dissertation morphed into his book, *The Road to Delhi*.¹

Not only did Pickett respond to what God was doing among the Dalits, he took the time to research their mass turning to Christ in the late 1800s and early 1900s. He published the findings of this research in the book *Christian Mass Movements in India*.² Up until that time there had been a significant amount of resistance in the Church to these people movements, but Pickett's research provided the validation that they needed.

One of the men involved in Pickett's research team was Donald McGavran, the father of the Church Growth Movement. The missiological principles unearthed in Pickett's research provided the foundational thinking behind the Church Growth Movement. Out of the Church Growth Movement came the Unreached Peoples Movement and out of that came Frontier Missions. Due to this, Pickett helped shape the missiological thinking of the church from the second half of the 1900s till now. And I haven't even mentioned the global influence of E. Stanley Jones.

Third, Asbury's impact continues through your faculty. You have a faculty who are devoted to the Lord and demonstrate academic excellence. They serve here so that pietism and innovation may continue to shape missions across the globe.

And if we are going to see the kingdom of God take root and spread among the peoples of the world religions, pietism and innovation are essential. We need to keep our roots firm in Jesus Christ as we attempt to move beyond where we have been. So, let me unpack what I mean by this.

Pietism Is the Foundation of All Mission

Let's be honest, without pietism there can be no missions. In order for missions to happen we have to personally encounter the Lord and out of that encounter move on to love him and please him in all we do. In that movement, the Lord directs his people to learn what he is up to in the world. As we learn, we are to respond by offering ourselves up to serve his purposes. As we respond to the Lord and since he is the overseer of his mission, he dispenses gifts as he wills, directing us to where he wants us to serve.

So, I think the calling to serve outside of one's first culture is the result of



an interactive process, the result of God's moving upon us along with our responsiveness to his moving. This responsiveness is crucial for all missions, but it is particularly crucial for frontier missions. By frontier missions I mean the particular focus within global missions on the peoples of the world's religions, that is, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Shinto peoples.

Why is this responsiveness particularly crucial for frontier missions?

This is a time of innumerable opportunities in all of missions, not just frontier missions. We live at a time when we can travel the world. We can get to Thailand from Kentucky in

about 24 hours. For US passport holders, there is almost no place we cannot go and the opportunities to serve are innumerable.

Yet, these opportunities for frontier missions are being overshadowed by the challenges. Most of the areas where the peoples of the world religions are found are difficult to enter and work in. Governments restrict access; and community resistance to the gospel is tangible. In addition, many of these areas are mired in conflict. Here are some examples of the difficulties working in these areas. Last year, Christian workers were expelled from China, India, Pakistan, and Egypt. In one country from 2007 to 2017, twenty-seven individuals connected to the Christian community were murdered by extremists. Four kidnappings occurred during that period as well.

It is so much easier to go to the parts of the world that are somewhat Christianized.

Yet, what is the dire need in global missions? Approximately 87 to 90% of all Christian workers work either among Christians or in areas where Christians exist in significant numbers. Approximately five to seven percent of Christian workers work with tribal groups. That leaves only about five percent of all Christian workers to focus on the peoples of the world religions who comprise almost 30% of the world's population. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, 86% of all Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus do not personally know a Christian, that is, any kind of Christian, nominal or devoted.³ With this statistic in mind, how are the vast majority of these peoples ever going to meet someone who can embody and explain the gospel to them? They won't.

The only way we are going to see this unbelievable imbalance in the global mission effort change is if the Lord's people take Paul's prayer in

Ephesians 3:14–21 seriously and make it their own:

...¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (NRSV).

Paul prayed that the Ephesians would come to know the breadth, length, height and depth of God's love—the love that embraces them and all the peoples of the world.⁴ Paul could not have been referring to a cognitive knowing because he says it surpasses knowledge. He was referring to an experiential knowing that happens through the working of the Spirit within us, a working of the Spirit that shapes who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we live out our lives in the world.

When Paul's prayer becomes our prayer and when it begins to be realized in our hearts, the love of Christ will compel us to offer ourselves to go to the peoples of the frontier regions so that they may know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Pietism is one of the foundation blocks for all missions. Without the dynamic interplay of God moving upon us and our responding to what he is doing, frontier mission simply will not happen.

Innovation Is Essential In Frontier Missions

And yet, pietism is not enough. Those who go need to be properly prepared so they can be open to what God is doing as the Word of God moves into new areas and among new peoples.⁵ Innovation has always been an essential component of frontier missions. Even though God has chosen to use us, his people, to advance his kingdom, our own inclinations can hinder us from properly responding to what he is doing.

The book of Acts and Paul's letter to the Galatians shows us that the Word

Innovation is needed today to move from where we are to spaces that will facilitate the growth of the kingdom among peoples of the world religions.

of God does not cross social, cultural, and religious boundaries easily. The apostles were charged to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Yet, they were slow to respond. It appears that their Jerusalem-centered perspective impeded their grasp of the charge. It was Phillip, a Hellenistic Jew, who was used by God to open the door to Samaritans and to those excluded due to physical disability (the Ethiopian Eunuch).⁶ Subsequently, God used Peter to open the door to the Gentiles; yet, Peter's actions at Cornelius' house received strong objections (Acts 11:2). Even when mentally acquiescing to uncircumcised Gentiles being included, it appears that Jewish communities were slow to understand its full implications. Luke tells us that even after the Cornelius event, the diaspora Jews only took the word to other Jews (Acts 11:19).⁷ It was believers from Cyprus and Cyrene in Antioch who moved the gospel forward among Gentiles as Gentiles (Acts 11:20).

Yet, even after what God had done in Antioch and through the apostolic ministry of Paul and Barnabas, God's inclusion of the Gentiles as Gentiles received significant opposition.

As we see in Acts, in Galatians, and throughout mission history, in our eagerness to be faithful to God, some of us can end up resisting and opposing what God is doing. Innovation in mission is essential; yet, it can be problematic when it happens.

I would like to point out four areas where innovation is needed today—where the contexts of frontier missions call us to move from where we are to spaces that will facilitate the growth of the kingdom in and among the peoples of the world religions.

Moving beyond Systematics to Text-sensitive Readings

The western church has a deep historic and cultural attachment to systematic theology. As a result, our systematic theologies shape teaching and training in churches, Bible schools, and seminaries. Two of the movements in the USA church today, the New Calvinist movement and the Acts 29 movement, are both centered around systematic theologies. And this is not to mention the way they shape our denominationalism.

Systematic theologies are beneficial because they provide internally coherent systems, making the faith easier to understand. They remove a vast amount of ambiguity and provide a safe structure for those who operate within them. They are easy to teach and learn and they make people feel competent and confident in their faith. In addition, these are valuable cultural artifacts arising from particular times and places that express the story of the church throughout the ages.⁸ Finally, "these are part of the chorus of the saints who have gone before us."⁹

Yet, with regard to mission, these systems have three fundamental weaknesses. The first weakness is that they are situated; each one arose in a particular time and place. Thus, they are culturally bounded,¹⁰ addressing questions and resolving issues that a particular group of people within a particular culture was asking and facing. These questions and issues are not ones that other groups are asking or facing, or at least, not in the same ways.¹¹

The second weakness is that each of these systems become the prism through which the Scripture is read. From a missional perspective, this is problematic.

Whether we like it or not, the Bible was written with an intentional level of ambiguity. Ancient Jewish rabbis were fully aware of this ambiguity and this is why different schools of *halakhab* arose to address it.¹² For example, all Jewish people knew that circumcision was a requirement to be carried out on the eighth day. But, the particulars about how to carry out the circumcision were not included. Questions arose as to “the instrument to use; whether it is to be a private rite or performed in community; the type of excision; and the liturgy.” For all these questions *halakbot* had to be created. We have this same ambiguity surrounding baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

From a missional perspective, this ambiguity is beneficial. It enables the gospel to be actualized in a variety of ways as it enters vastly different cultures. Since one of the functions of a systematic theology is to reduce ambiguity, each system is a bit reductionistic. When the systems reach the popular level, the systems are expressed through a series of schemata, which are even more reductionistic.

The third weakness is how we use systematic theologies. The systems typically end up being exclusive. The adopted system is “right” which by default renders the other systems “wrong” even though they are held by many in the body of Christ.

Many, if not most, of today’s mission force have downloaded these systems and exported them. This exporting has characterized the global missions movement since the 1700s. This exporting leads to a number of problems, five of which I can quickly suggest:

1. the systems set the nature of theological discourse, a discourse that does not necessarily connect intellectually or emotionally with the intended communities;¹³
2. the gospel as presented is culturally bounded and is thus perceived by the intended communities as irrelevant;
3. irrelevance leads to marginal responsiveness;
4. irrelevance leads to a high degree of syncretism among those who convert;
5. and since adherence to a particular set of doctrines and an ecclesiology is vital, sectarian divisions and denominationalism are the natural result.

If we are going to see the gospel enter and transform communities of the world religions, the missions force needs to move beyond our allegiance to and the exporting of our theological systems. Overseas workers need to learn how to read the Scripture in text-sensitive ways, paying attention to the historical and literary contexts of



each of the books. When this happens, frontier workers will not be trying to teach systems; rather, they will be trying to get their friends and colleagues to read the Scripture with their own eyes from their own vantage points, seeking to discover how the text answers the questions that they are asking, and receiving guidance for their real-life situations. Asbury’s faculty is well equipped to enable people for this.

Moving beyond Contextualization to Releasing Local Theologizing

This recognition of different vantage points in textual reading of the Scriptures leads us to turn to the crucial

subject of contextualization. Hesselgrave and Rommen recognized that the gospel needed to be relevant, so they advocated for the contextualization of the gospel, which they put forward as a model of *critical contextualization*.¹⁴ Paul Hiebert capitalized on this model and moved it a bit further with his proposal of a *metatheology*,¹⁵ which would inherently be transcultural.¹⁶ These missiologists were moving in the right direction, yet I perceive their models had two basic problems.

Beyond Metatheology

The first problem was this: the notion of a transcultural metatheology is comforting because it makes the entire process of contextualizing the gospel appear safe. The metatheology would provide a recognizable standard by which to measure the contextualized outcome.¹⁷ Yet, they did not ask who had the authority to determine the content of what constituted the metatheology.

How do we determine what content constitutes the metatheology?¹⁸ First, I think we will all agree that the books of the Bible were intended to move across cultures. Yet, even though we confidently assert that these books were written for us, we know that they were not written to us. We were not the intended recipients of those documents by their human authors.¹⁹ Therefore, even the biblical texts are historically and culturally framed and must go through a translation process. This is not a process of just translating words, but it is a complex process of translating ideas and concepts.

Second, we will all agree that the content of all theology should arise from the biblical texts and that our commitment to being Bible-centered, Christ-centered, cross-centered, conversionist, and missional, should precede and shape any theologizing.

Beyond that, when we begin to suggest content for the metatheology, problems arise. For example, I am sure we

would all agree that the Christ-event is transcultural. Yet, even the ways different faith communities exegete the meaning of the Christ-event varies according to culture.²⁰ As a result, the notion of a metatheology is flawed.

Beyond Coloniality

This leads us to the second problem with the model of critical contextualization. For all practical purposes, outsiders assume the position as the final arbiter of “truth” and exercise a degree of control and authority over the contextualization process and outcomes.²¹ This means that the outsider’s perspective and theological positions are privileged. Yet, we also know that all “knowledge claims” are limited in perspective; and no knowledge claim is 100 percent objective.²² So, to place the final authority in the hands of outsiders seems like a vestige of colonialism.

Now, colonialism is a political term that described historical events from the 1500s to the 1960s. Colonialism is strictly speaking a thing of the past. So, it appears inappropriate to use this term in our current mission contexts; however, certain characteristics of colonialism remain. Due to this, the preferred term currently used to refer to this privileging of one’s cultural perspective is coloniality.²³ It identifies the tendency towards a culturally bounded theology and the subsequent exercise of authority in the critical contextualization process.

The problem of coloniality surfaced with the Son of God translation fiasco some years back. The very fact that the WEA formed an independent panel of outsiders to assess this issue and that panel subsequently appointed a team of outsiders to exercise final authority over locally run translation projects demonstrated this problem of coloniality inherent in the critical contextualization model.

Coloniality is simply not appropriate in our postcolonial world. So, we need

T*o empower local theologizing we need to give up control and imitate Paul, who had full confidence in the working of the Holy Spirit.*

to move beyond critical contextualization as a model to a more intentional releasing and empowering of local theologizing.

However, when we release and empower local theologizing, we lose control over the outcomes. If our goal is seeing the peoples of the world religions turn to Christ, we need to give up control and imitate Paul, who had full confidence in the working of the Holy Spirit.

Moving beyond the Stoicheia (στοιχεῖα) of Our Worlds to Faith and Freedom

This problem of outsiders exercising authority and control is not new. Paul faced it with the circumcision groups. These groups asserted that the Gentiles needed to meet certain criteria (be circumcised and follow the injunctions of the Torah as they interpreted them) in order to solidify and continue on in their covenant relationship with God (Acts 15:1–2). To add complexity to the matter, their criteria was drawn from Scripture. With regard to circumcision, it was Yahweh who said: “So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant” (Gen. 17:13b NRSV). Notwithstanding, Paul knew the understanding of the circumcision groups was flawed. This was one reason why he was so pointed in his rebuke of them in Galatians 1:6–9.

Paul went so far as to label the circumcision groups’ understanding of the Torah as the *stoicheia* of the world (Gal. 4:3), which he placed on the same footing as the Galatians’ pagan *stoicheia* of the world (Gal. 4:3, 9).²⁴

So, the question is: What did Paul mean by the *stoicheia* of the world? It appears that the *stoicheia* referred to the ways that people in the Jewish and

Gentile worlds thought and constructed their world,²⁵ the ways that they shaped and organized themselves, including their assumptions, values, narratives, and folklore.²⁶ It included the religious, social, and political dimensions of their world because in their minds these would have been seamlessly intertwined.²⁷ Thus, Paul was saying that the fundamental assumptions and values, as well as religious practices, of these circumcision groups, even though they were shaped by their allegiance to God and understanding of the Torah, were as disadvantageous for following Christ as the fundamental assumptions, values, and practices of the pagan Galatians. Paul had discovered this from his own experience. Having been zealous for the law, he ended up completely misguided, seriously persecuting the church as a result.²⁸

Since Paul was casting off the circumcision groups’ understanding of the Torah—which provided guidelines for how to live before God, protected the Jewish people, and ensured their ongoing acceptance with God (Gal. 3:24a)—what then was the guarantee for Paul that the Galatians would remain acceptable to God? Paul knew that Torah-sanctioned rules, regulations, and customs would in the end lead the Galatians away from Christ. Paul realized that the Torah could no longer be “the authoritative cultural frame of the good news.”²⁹ Its severe limitation had been expressed when Peter and the others pulled away from table fellowship with the Antiochian Gentiles. Paul knew that

Jews and non-Jews are “called” by an incongruous grace into common belonging to Christ. Their previous evaluations of one another and of their traditions based on the cultural norms of ethnic distinction, are

subverted by an event that has paid no regard to pre-constituted criteria of value. They are therefore drawn into an association of mutual recognition that is blind to ethnic evaluations, as to other differentials of worth. To reinstate a Jewish rule of sociality would be to condition this association by a differentiating norm that is not derivable from the “truth of the good news.” In fact, the good news is good precisely in its disregard of former criteria of worth, both Jewish and Gentile: the gospel stands or falls with the incongruity of grace.³⁰

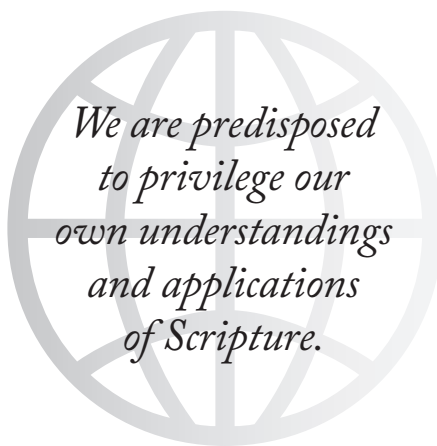
Now that Christ had come, these Torah standards of the circumcision groups could only be classified as weak and worthless *stoicheia* of the world; and the threat was that the Galatians would follow these rather than Christ.

The advantage the Galatians had over the understanding of circumcision groups was that their faith in Christ had enabled them to be born of the Spirit (Gal. 4:29) and have Christ living in them (Gal. 2:20). The indwelling Christ and Spirit, therefore, could be depended upon to properly guide and shape them.³¹ Jesus had set the Galatians free from the present evil age (Gal. 1:4). Being alive in Christ they were empowered to turn from the obvious works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–20) and follow the Spirit who gave them life (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25). The clear guidance they already had was that they were to seek to live out Christ’s sacrificial love in their relationships (Gal. 5:6, 13–14), and by doing so they would fulfill the Law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).³² Love for Paul was not a generic nebulous feeling, but it was to be defined and characterized by Christ’s self-sacrificial death (Gal. 1:4, 2:20, 3:13, 5:13).³³

The concerns and fears of the circumcision groups revolved around the fact that the lifestyles and standards of the Galatians were different—and offensive. Paul understood that the Galatians would never look or act like their Jewish sisters and brothers because

the Galatians’ world was different. Nevertheless, the Galatians and the Jewish believers were one “family”; and the family resemblance would be seen through their shared ultimate loyalty (to Christ and the Word) and their character (the fruit of the Spirit).

Times change but people don’t. We as humans are limited in our understanding and we are predisposed to privilege our own understandings and applications of Scripture. That which caused the concerns and fears of the circumcision groups and the tensions they created for Gentile churches persist into our own day, especially in the frontier mission areas. So, this letter, even Paul’s stinging rebuke, was written for



us. If we do not take proper care in reflecting on just what the gospel is, we will attach our culturally bounded understandings and applications of Scripture to the gospel. These in Paul’s terms can be viewed as our law and *stoicheia*. When we do this, we end up preaching a gospel contrary to the one Paul preached and we open ourselves to Paul’s sore rebuke.

To advance the gospel in frontier areas, we need to take Paul’s admonition and teaching seriously. We need to move beyond exporting our culturally bounded applications of the gospel. We are to move beyond feeling the need to guarantee what being a follower of Christ looks like and

move into a place of faith and trust in Christ, his Spirit, and the Word. This leads to an immense amount of freedom for our friends who have turned to Christ and for us. Their response to the gospel resulted in Christ living in them. They should be encouraged in their earnest desire to learn how to live by and follow the Spirit as they study the Word of God made intelligible in their language.

Moving beyond Separatism to Remaining within One’s Community

One of the ways our *stoicheia* of the world manifests itself is in our approach to the communities of the world religions. Our evangelical roots seem to be shaped by Anabaptist sentiments and the fundamentalist movement of the late 1800s and the early 1900s. Rich as Anabaptist theology is and the fundamentalist movement was, they both lead us toward taking a separatist approach to communities and culture.³⁴

A conversation with a colleague exemplifies this. We were talking about how a Muslim should respond to his community when coming to faith in Jesus. His definitive answer was: “The Scripture says: ‘Come out from among them and be separate.’”

This pervading but unrecognized separatist drive influences us to view other cultures as non-, pre-, or post-Christian. If a culture falls into one of these categories our tendency is to view many if not all of the aspects of those cultures as deficient or evil and in need of transformation. When doing so, what we do not realize is that we are subconsciously elevating our “Christian” cultures as superior. Bosch recognized this back in 1991 and wrote:

Surveying the great variety of ways in which Western cultural norms were, implicitly or explicitly, imposed upon converts in other parts of the

world, it is of some significance to note that both liberals and conservatives shared the assumption that Christianity was the only basis for a healthy civilization; this was a form of consensus so fundamental that it operated mainly on an unconscious, presuppositional level.³⁵

Thirty years ago, Bosch framed this as a western problem. However, in the contemporary missions environment, this problem surfaces wherever Christians reside, whether they be Christians from the West, or from East Asia, South Asia, North Africa, or the Middle East.

This separatism has other consequences. It influences some to demonize the world religions, or at minimum to demonize their practices. One colleague asserted that every Muslim coming to faith needed deliverance from the spirit of Islam. A few years back I was in Pune, India, attending a church and Diwali (their festival of lights) was to begin the following day. A leader in the church exhorted everyone in the church to stand and pledge they would not text congratulations to their Hindu friends when Diwali began because Diwali was demonic. They as Christians needed to maintain a visible separation from that evil.

When we view God as actively involved historically and currently in and among each people group, this opens the door for viewing fallen, human cultures and their practices, even religious ones, in a more nuanced manner (Greer 2016, pp. 96–97). We can view these cultures like we perceive the moon. The moon has a bright and dark side. Since all cultures exist in a fallen state (“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Rom. 3:23), we can confidently assert that each and every culture has a dark side. Yet, this is only half the story. If we perceive God as actively working in and among any given culture, ensuring that things exist within these cultures so that people will seek for him, it can change the way we view many of their

When we view God as active in each people group, it opens the door for viewing fallen, human cultures in a more nuanced manner.

cultural and even religious forms. It was Paul who said:

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being,” as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” (Acts 17:26–28 NRSV)

When we understand that God has been at work among a people, we are released to acknowledge a bright side exists. In this light we are free to intentionally look for the bright spots, the bridges to God that he has mysteriously provided within each culture—including religious ideas and forms—that can be used to draw people to him.

I left Pune on the first day of Diwali and flew to Delhi. There I stayed with a family, the husband of which was Hindu in background. He had small, flickering oil lamps inside and outside his house. He was celebrating Diwali because Diwali was an integral part of his culture. His reasoning was Diwali was a festival of lights. Since Jesus is the light of the world and we are called to be his lights in the world, it was totally appropriate to use the forms of Diwali to celebrate what he believed.

The assumptions that drive our negative perceptions of culture create the need to put up strict boundaries in order to maintain a clear separation from evil. These are simply an extension of our own stoicheia of the world, and these sentiments mirror those of the circumcision groups in Paul’s day. Richard Bauckham indicates that those groups sought to identify the

boundaries for followers of Christ and how moral purity would be attained and maintained. The circumcision groups regarded

circumcision and observance of the whole Torah as essential for Gentile sinners to become righteous, since it is these that separate people from the contamination of the pervasive idolatry and immorality of non-Jewish society.³⁶

Our desire for separatism creates a serious impediment. When your own alumnus Wascom Pickett was researching the mass movements to Christ in his day he discovered that group movements to Christ prevented social dislocation. From his research Pickett discovered that the separation of converts from their communities was more harmful than helpful. He observed something vital about the individual convert, that

single conversion unfortunately leads usually to a complete break of the convert with his group. This involves him in economic loss and mental anguish and deprives him of valuable restraints upon wrong-doing and supports to right living.³⁷

The Church has seen a serious level of recidivism among converts across the Muslim world. People are encouraged to take a bold stand for Jesus and declare that they have become Christians. This typically leads to immediate persecution and eventual social dislocation.³⁸ Many are not able to withstand their continued alienation and isolation from their communities. It takes exceptionally strong people to stand apart from their communities throughout life; and they are the few. Though the recidivism may not be as high among Hindu background believers as Muslims, I am aware that the isolation created by this separation is just as heart-breaking.

Pickett's research shows us that people are more likely to remain in the faith if they remain in their communities and are then able to see family members or larger units turn to Christ in their communities. Thus, it is best in frontier missions that we move beyond separatism to releasing and empowering followers of Jesus to learn from the Spirit how they can remain within their communities so others will encounter and follow the Lord. We may be uncomfortable with how that looks at the outset, but we need to remember that everyone is on a journey—and the Spirit is guiding that journey. How things look today may not be how they look in the future.

Conclusion

Pietism is one of the foundation blocks for all missions. Without pietism there is no mission. The natural corollary to pietism is innovation, which is an openness to God's working in new and unexpected ways. We need this openness and responsiveness if we are going to see the kingdom of God take root and spread among frontier peoples. We have enough evidence that the exportation of our culturally bounded, well-honed theological systems, church infrastructures, and "Christianized" behaviors has been seriously problematic.

Yet, innovation is unsettling. When the Lord calls us to journey out into new areas, we find ourselves facing uncharted territory. We discover that many of our conceptions of the gospel, church, worship, prayer, and ethics are culturally bounded and not applicable in those contexts. This takes us out of our comfort zones.

We have two choices when faced with this discomfort: stay within our comfort zones, or choose to live incarnationally,³⁹ growing in our understanding of the world of our hosts, and flowing with the Spirit. As we learn how their world functions, we will end up welcoming things that appear

wrong to those outside those contexts. We give up our secure systematics and seek to read the Bible in text-sensitive ways along with its apparent ambiguity. We realize that this ambiguity creates a flexibility that enables the gospel to be meaningfully expressed in ways that affirm and challenge the cultures of those who receive the gospel. We, thus, release and enable our friends to read the text with their eyes so they can discover through the Spirit what the Scripture is saying to them. They can discover how they can apply the biblical truth in their world so that Christ may be formed in them.⁴⁰ We also refrain from imposing our standards and ways upon them because Christ has called them to freedom from the *stoicheia* of



our foreign world as well as from their familiar world. Finally, we allow them to discover how they can remain in and honor their communities so that their communities may encounter and be transformed by our Lord.

Mission must move beyond in this postcolonial world. Yet, any innovation on the frontiers, in those contexts beyond the familiar modality of a home church, where our established forms of pietism appear insufficient, will create a tension for cross-cultural agents of the gospel. People outside these contexts, our friends, family and even our colleagues, typically cannot understand all that God is doing within them.⁴¹ But the biblical record makes it clear that we

cannot avoid this tension. God knows we cannot avoid it on the frontiers, but he calls us to join him and live in that tension with the love of Christ. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Arthur McPhee, *The Road to Delhi: J. Waskom Pickett and Missions in the Twilight of the Raj and Dawn of Nationhood*, (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press), 2012.

² J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, (New York, Cincinnati: Abingdon Press), 1933.

³ "Global Evangelism: Christianity in Context 2015," Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, accessed August 30, 2019, <https://gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2019/04/1EvangelismInfographic.pdf>.

⁴ Though some might point out that Paul does not mention "all the peoples of the world" in this prayer, in the antecedent passage to this prayer (2:11 to 3:13) Paul speaks of the inclusion of the Gentiles, which encapsulates all the peoples of the world.

⁵ David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 150–159. For the significance of the journey of the Word, especially in how this can inform our big picture view of global mission.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary. Volume 2: 3:1–14:28* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1727–1730. God had moved slowly to prepare the Jewish believers for the inclusion of the Gentiles as Gentiles. The first step was at Pentecost where peoples heard the praises of God in foreign languages. The second is the identifying of one of the seven deacons, Nicolaus, as a proselyte, indicating he was a Gentile in background (Acts 6:5). The third is the word coming to the Samaritans, and then to the Ethiopian Eunuch. The Ethiopian Eunuch was a devout, God-fearing Gentile who was deeply committed to the Jewish faith according to Keener in *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol 2*, 1566–1567. Being a eunuch, he could not have been a proselyte. The fourth is God appointing Peter to go to Cornelius, who was a devout, God-fearing Gentile. The final step is Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene going to the Gentiles as Gentiles in Antioch. This gradual progression from Diaspora Jews in Acts 2 to uncircumcised Gentiles in Acts 11 was God's gracious step-by-step process to help smooth the way for the full inclusion of Gentiles as Gentile.

⁷ F. Spencer points out that we are not informed of any “further work among the Gentiles of Caesarea. The gospel road ha[d] been paved to the Gentiles, but the traffic remain[ed] sparse.” F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 129. In contrast, Keener points out in *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 2*, 1830 that “some scholars even suggest that the process of reaching Gentiles probably began as soon as Hellenists left Jerusalem, and not just in Antioch.”

We are sorely limited in our historical data on this innovative process; so, our reconstructions are limited. With this caution in mind, I proceed. I suggest it wise to factor into our reconstructions how difficult this paradigm shift would have been for Jewish believers: to include unreservedly uncircumcised, non-Torah following Gentiles as Gentiles into the fold.

The narrative of Peter in Acts 10 gives us a picture into these Jewish sentiments. Peter had three visions in succession to enable him to begin to make this shift and go to Cornelius’ house. Upon entering the house, Peter informed everyone that Jews and Gentiles do not mix. It can be that God’s acceptance of Cornelius was a sensitive, gradual step, not a radical one, in moving His people forward toward accepting Gentiles as Gentiles into the one body of Christ. This is because Cornelius is portrayed as a “God-fearing Gentile,” which is a category that already had existed in the Jewish mindset. Accepting those like Cornelius and his household without compelling circumcision would have been easier for Jewish messianic communities to accept than for a Gentile who didn’t fall within that category. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 2*, 1754–1755.

That being said, even with that personal experience, we see that Peter separated himself from table fellowship with the Antiochene Gentile believers. Barnabas and the other Jewish believers separated themselves as well (Gal. 2:11–13). The text indicates that coming to understand and adapt to what God was doing with the Gentiles as Gentiles was a process for them all, not an instantaneous event. It also appears that the decree in Acts 15:19–21 was a compromise, another step for the Jewish community, charting their gradual movement toward full inclusion of Gentiles as Gentiles. See Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 3: 15:1–23:35* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 2258–2268. Though this is a subject of debate, it seems plausible that making this paradigm shift

was also a process for Paul. When did Paul come to a full understanding of the implications of the inclusion of Gentiles as Gentiles? Was it immediate? During his time in Arabia? Both are possible. However, if God was moving his church gradually to accept the inclusion of Gentiles as Gentiles in the church, it seems unlikely. In addition, when Paul returns to Damascus, he is recorded as reaching out to Jews not Gentiles (Acts 9:22). That being said, Paul knew from his interaction with Jesus on the Damascus Road that his ministry was to be among the Gentiles; yet, he may not have started that kind of ministry until his return to Tarsus. Whether he started in Arabia or not, his ministry among the Gentiles at that point was likely not very effective. It simply is not mentioned. Nonetheless, even with a ministry to Gentiles in Tarsus, it is entirely possible that Paul did not grasp the full implications of the inclusion of the Gentiles as Gentiles until he saw what God was doing among them in Antioch. Though Lamin Sanneh is likely overstating here, he sees Paul’s experience in Antioch as necessary for Paul to come to a full understanding of what God was doing: “The experience of the Gentile church brought Paul to the radical edge of his own tradition. His religious sentiments were progressively adjusted by the exposure to the Gentile movement; mission does not spare its own founders.” Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*. Second Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 33.

Having come to terms with the full ramifications of Gentile inclusion may explain why Paul made a trip to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus toward the end of his time in Antioch and before his first missionary journey. David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians. The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Joel Green (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 49–58. In contrast, looking at this Jerusalem trip as the Acts 15 meeting, see Craig S. Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 6–13. This radical paradigm shift—even with the revelation he had received—may explain why Paul wanted to consult with the leaders of Jerusalem in private, to ensure that he was on the right path. He writes: “I laid before them . . . the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain” (Gal. 2:2 NRSV). Why is this important? Making paradigm shifts are difficult for us as well. These shifts typically happen gradually.

⁸ For how the church has looked culturally diverse across the ages, see Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Christian Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 3–15.

⁹ Christopher M. Currie, Personal Communication in 2019.

¹⁰ With regard to how systematic theologies are culturally bounded, see Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, revised and expanded edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 32.

¹¹ For examples of this see: Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Theology*, second ed. (Oxford, UK: Regnum Books International, 2013), accessed on Kindle; Jackson Wu, *Saving God’s Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame*, EMS Dissertation Series, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2013); and Mark Baker and Joel Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

¹² Phillip Sigal, *The Halakhah of Jesus of Nazareth according to the Gospel of Matthew* (Atlanta, GA: The Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 15–17. In an earlier book, Phillip Sigal defines halakhah in this way: “I use the term both to describe a general process and an individual norm of conduct. To be halakhic, therefore, means to affirm the idea that right conduct is significant in the religious life. Furthermore, the term applies both to conduct pertaining to the human’s relationship with God, (ritual) and the human’s relationship with other humans, ethics. And finally, one may express oneself in moralistic tones without invoking the more precise language of halakhah, what to do now and how to do it, and yet be engaged in halakhic method by virtue of the implications of one’s moralistic sermon on one’s wisdom discourse. The Book of Wisdom and Proverbs are not generally regarded as halakhic works. But they are every bit as significantly halakhically as long exhortative passages of Deuteronomy.” Phillip Sigal, “The Halakhah of James,” in *Intergerini Parietis Septvum (Eph. 2:14): Essays Presented to Markus Barth on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series #33, ed. Dikran Y. Hadidian (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 1981), 338.

¹³ Sigal, *Halakhah of Jesus, Matthew*, 16. Postcolonial theological discourses help us reflect on how we have privileged the ways we think and talk theologically. Steve Hu

sensitizes us to the significance and impact of these discourses: “I’ve discovered that postcolonial discourse grants me voice and allows me to speak so that I can be heard by those sitting at the theological roundtable, a table that long has been the domain of Westerners and privy only to those who can speak its predetermined discourse. This table has been so embedded in Western forms and categories that when I attempt to converse, my words, as Tite Tiéou notes, ‘are perceived as threats to orthodoxy.’” Steve Hu, “The Importance of Postcolonial Evangelical Conversations,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, ed. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha and L. Daniel Hawk (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 196–203, Kindle.

¹⁴ David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989).

¹⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 98–1

¹⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 217–219.

¹⁷ What also feeds into this idea of a metatheology is what some assume to be a single biblical worldview—that a biblical culture exists. The Scripture does not appear to speak of a single redeemed culture. It speaks of a single body of Christ that will ultimately be comprised of every people, tongue, and nation (Rev. 5:9–10). Revelation 21:22–26 appears to indicate that cultural diversity will continue in the new heaven and earth. The Scripture seems to create an image of the singular body of Christ being a commonwealth of nations, where the nations (ethnicities, people groups) maintain their cultural distinctives while coming together under the Lordship of Christ. Paul’s use of the word *politeuma* in Phil. 3:20 also points us in this direction (see C. H. Dodd, *The Meaning of Paul for Today* [London, UK: Fontana Books, 1958], 48–50.) It seems more appropriate to speak of biblically informed cultures or biblically informed worldviews rather than a biblical culture or biblical worldview. It should also be understood that being biblically informed is a constant journey, never a destination.

¹⁸ Melba Maggay writes: “A longtime missionary in India, for instance, has asserted that one can only proceed from a ‘dogmatic contextualization,’ which he defined as ‘the translation of the unchanging content of the

Gospel of the Kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in the separate cultures and within their particular existential situation.’ The trouble with this definition is that it assumes that the task of contextualization is, at bottom, merely adaptation; it consists mostly of finding ‘dynamic equivalencies’ for propositional truths systematized by theologies developed in the West and deemed universal . . . this is an unsafe assumption. It is true that there is an unchanging ‘deposit of the faith,’ but this comprises more than propositions. And while it may be said to be ‘supracultural,’ our knowledge and access to it is always culture-bound, and the theologies that arise out of the historic contingencies of a given context are always local.” Melba Padilla Maggay, “The Task of Contextualization: Issue in Reading, Appropriating, and Transmitting the Faith” in *The Gospel in Culture*, ed. Melba P. Maggay (Manila, Philippines: OMF Literature and Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 2013), 6–7.

¹⁹ John H. Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians: From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 5.

²⁰ Simon Chan, Hwa Yung, and Jackson Wu point this out in their books: Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014); Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*; and Wu, *Saving God’s Face*. For more on how culture impacts meaningful presentations of the gospel, see Jason Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016); Werner Mischke, *The Global Gospel: Achieving Missional Impact in Our Multicultural World* (Scottsdale, AZ: Mission ONE, 2015); and Bradford Greer, “Toward More Meaningful Interaction: Re-thinking How We Articulate the Gospel,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 26, no. 1 (2009): 37–43.

²¹ Even though I highly value Bauer’s exceptional description of the problem of syncretism, this issue of outsiders as final arbiters and authority remains. For an example of how this looks, see Bruce L. Baur, “Avoiding Comfortable Syncretism by Doing Critical Contextualization,” *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (2005): 18–33, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1166&context=jams>.

²² For a fuller development of this, see Bradford Greer, “Starting Points:

Approaching the Frontier Missiological Task,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 33, no. 3 (2016): 94–95.

²³ Robert Heaney defines coloniality as “a state or process of subjugating culture and/or agency by incursive cultural and theological discourses.” R. S. Heaney, “Prospects and Problems for Evangelical Postcolonialisms,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations*, ed. Smith, Lalitha and Hawk, 392–393, Kindle.

²⁴ Keener, *Galatians*, 358. Explaining Paul’s overall position on the Torah is very difficult to do. Suffice it to say, Paul knew that the time for the Torah as “law” for Jews and Gentiles had come to an end. He also knew that the Torah’s function as “instruction” would remain because the Torah was still Scripture (see footnote 22).

²⁵ Paul uses the word *stoicheia* here in Galatians 4:3, 9, and adds the verb *stoichomen* in 5:25 and then *stoichesousin* in 6:16. The usage of these may indicate that Paul’s focus when using *stoicheia* was the ways of their world that they followed.

²⁶ David deSilva described these *stoicheia*—these elementary principles—as those which “divide the world and all that constitutes it, creating the categories, hierarchies, and evaluations that guide, limit, and constrain human beings in their thoughts, behaviors, and interactions, keeping them in a form of ideological and systemic bondage.” DeSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, 353.

²⁷ Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). In the first century perception, there was no divide between culture and religion. It was all integrated. Thus, the discussions about discerning whether Paul is speaking of elementary principles or elementary spirits appears a bit off the mark. Conceptually separating religion from culture is a modern convention.

²⁸ Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 66–67.

²⁹ John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 374.

³⁰ Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 369–370.

³¹ N. T. Wright writes: “The divine life itself is transforming believers, shaping them from the inside out according to the pattern of the Messiah.” Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Book II: Parts 3 and 4* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 781.

³² Paul knew that the study of Torah would continue as it was God’s revelation

(2 Tim. 3:16–17). Nonetheless, he also knew that the approach to Torah had changed with Jesus. In this light he uses this phrase: “the law of Christ.” Describing this change, Keener writes: “the law as interpreted in light of Jesus, especially the love command in [Gal.] 5:14, and now lived out through the Spirit of Christ living in believers (5:18, 23), in a way that includes bearing one another’s burdens.” Keener, *Galatians*, 540. Barclay describes this as “the law as redefined and fulfilled in Christ.” John M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: Paul’s Ethics in Galatians* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 1988), 134.

³³ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1996), 46.

³⁴ For one person’s reflections about separatism, see: David Fitch, “Finding Things to Love About Reformed People: An Anabaptist Dialogues with a Reformed,” MissioAlliance, February 6, 2017, https://www.missioalliance.org/finding-things-love-reformed-people-anabaptist-dialogues-reformed/?fbclid=IwAR3aw2nVXaxqfUoLApTI5z1UVPa1PO65wDM-_W0RbWmQCmcGV7MxX7u-u8.

³⁵ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 296.

³⁶ Richard Bauckham, “James, Peter, and the Gentiles,” in *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2005), 118.

³⁷ Arthur McPhee, *The Road to Delbi: J. Waskom Pickett and Missions in the Twilight of the Raj and Dawn of Nationhood* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2012), 230.

³⁸ In some rare cases it can lead to death. Persecution and isolation are typically the result in our era.

³⁹ Some have objected to the use of the term “incarnational” in this manner. John Cheong has provided a solid rebuttal to their objections. John Cheong, “Reassessing John Stott’s, David Hesselgrave’s, and Andreas Kostenberger’s Views of the Incarnational Model,” in *Missionary Methods: Research, Reflections, and Realities*, ed. Craig Ott and J. D. Payne, Evangelical Missiological Society, Book 21 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 39–60.

⁴⁰ In saying this, it needs to be recognized that these groups are not operating in a vacuum. They will be operating in a globalized context and where the Scriptures have

already been translated, where members of their communities have been discipled and are in ongoing relationships with believers from outside their communities.

⁴¹ In studying the history of mission movements, Ralph Winter identified that a consistent pattern of tension existed between established churches which he referred to as modalities, and new churches that were being formed in new cultural contexts, which he referred to as sodalities. This tension existed because the new churches did not function in the same way as the established churches. Such change (innovation) was consistently resisted by the modalities. See Ralph D. Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Third Edition, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 220–230.

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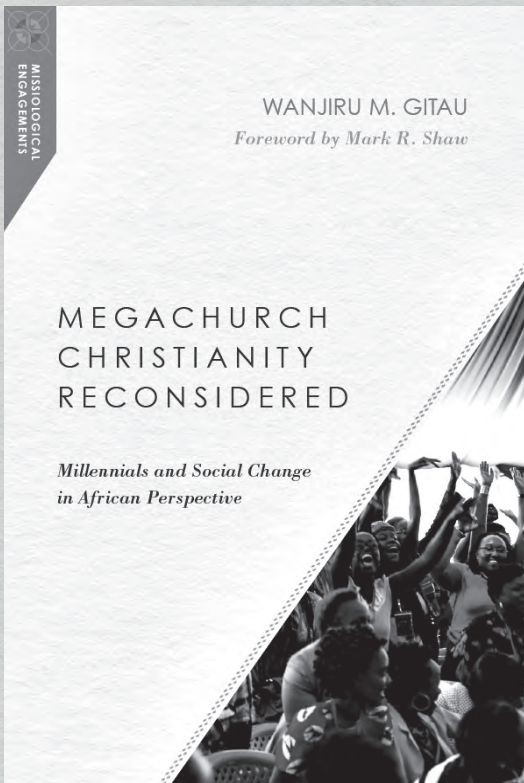
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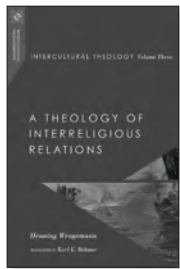
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Books and Missiology

A Theology of Interreligious Relations (Intercultural Theology, Volume Three), by Henning Wrogemann, tr. Karl E. Böhmer (from German, 2015), (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), xxi + 502 pp.

—Reviewed by H. L. Richard



Henning Wrogemann makes an impressive big picture attempt to change paradigms and terminologies in his introduction to a theology of interreligious relations, with many sparkling insights along the way. He acknowledges that this is a tentative beginning (“even though they [the reflections contained in this volume] are somewhat fragmentary in nature . . . ,” xx), and this review will accordingly critique aspects of his presentation. But Wrogemann’s comprehensive analysis is a welcome challenge to religious paradigms that need to be discarded, and the book will be a great success if it stimulates various institutions and organizations to rewrite their curricula with new approaches. (The focus of the book is the curricula in Wrogemann’s own context of German higher education.)

Due to the author’s very broad approach to this subject, this reviewer was never quite certain exactly what Wrogemann was aiming at. Indeed, he clearly states that “this book proposes both a *theory of interreligious relations* and a related but methodologically independent *theology of interreligious relations*” (xx, italics original). But this suggested focus still leaves scope for the many related topics that Wrogemann addresses in his voluminous analysis. In the introduction to this new English translation he also indicates that:

It is the contention of this present volume that many contemporary theology-of-religion publications are simply incapable of answering the pressing questions of today. (xvii)

And Wrogemann does pretty well in exposing that incapability, yet I’m not satisfied that he ever gets to the roots of the problems in theology of religion.

By the end of the book Wrogemann is explicit about the overall aim of his larger three-volume project, of which this is the final volume. His focus is a new paradigm for mission studies:

... being a new term and an elaboration on the older subject heading *mission studies*, intercultural theology examines the processes in which in the course of the expansion of the Christian religious configuration, cultures, and contexts change due to Christian presences and practices. (454; italics original)

In other words, intercultural theology refers to a new form of mission studies. (462; italics original)

Before weaving these different objectives, Wrogemann is very clear about a fundamental presupposition of his work:

... this volume holds to the thesis that New Testament claims to ultimate validity are precisely what forms the Christian basis for lasting, sustainable, and constructive relations with the followers of other religious traditions. (xvii)

This reviewer is not certain that Wrogemann has demonstrated this thesis in his massive study, but would also opine that it is not a vital point to be made. It is always refreshing to read a strong affirmation of the “ultimate validity” of the New Testament amidst inter-religious relations (especially in light of later comments to be noted below on the interpretation of the Bible), but that this New Testament affirmation actually supports (as compared to undermines) relations with followers of other faiths is not easily demonstrated, and is arguably contradicted by history.

From the outset Wrogemann understands that “constructive relations with followers of other religious traditions” must face new historical conditions of globalization and pluralization. In his first chapter, “A Theology of Religions or a Theology of Interreligious Relations?,” he offers a brilliant summary of an older Western discourse of religion that is now problematic:

These [Western] perceptual patterns include the notion that cultures and religions are *uniform and very distinct entities*; the notion that at the heart of these cultures and religions is an essential core that guarantees their uniformity over long periods of time; the notion that *a religion’s real nature* is reflected not so much in its praxis but *in its religious scriptures*; the notion that *religions with written scriptures are fundamentally superior* to those without them; and the notion that *a people group is properly governed* when it is governed *according to its own laws*. This prompted colonial administrations to embark on a quest to identify the appropriate indigenous legal traditions.

In the framework of colonial discourse, typifications of other religions provided handy references for proving their backwardness as compared to the Christian civilizations of the West,

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Wrogemann lays a foundation for an all-out attack on our current constructs of religion, yet he appears to accept that Islam and Buddhism are religions and never offers an explicit critique of this dominant paradigm.

thereby serving to justify the colonial occupation. For instance, we frequently come across statements about Islam's inherent incapacity for reform as a result of its eternal and immutable law, the shari'a, and as a result of the fatalism of the Muslim people. Similarly, we find references to the passivity of Asian cultures and religions. The political exploitability of such religious comparisons is rather self-evident. (8-9, italics original)

This lays a foundation for an all-out attack on our current constructs of "religion," yet throughout the book Wrogemann continues to use this disputed term and never offers an explicit critique of the dominant paradigm that there are only a dozen or so "world religions" (an implicit critique will be noted below). The very title of the book assumes that the term "interreligious" carries a clear meaning, when in fact it does not.

Later, in this first chapter, Wrogemann has the bold sub-heading, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: An Obituary of a Model" (14). The obituary of this very typical three-fold construct is probably premature, but the critique is valid. (There could also be obituaries for theology of religion and mission studies as I have previously pointed out; these also would no doubt be premature obituaries.)

Evaluating Theory-of-Religion Models

In part 1, Wrogemann uses seven chapters to lay out his critique of current theologies of religion (e.g., revisionist, interpretive, interactionist, comparative, etc.). His objections to pluralism are especially impressive, as he shows that pluralist assumptions against specific truth claims (like those we affirm in the New Testament) are fundamentally non-pluralist. Wrogemann states that pluralists insist on a "self-relativization" (86) by those who believe in the truth of their scriptures. So while the pluralist call for a new foundation for interreligious interaction sounds impressive, it in fact fails to accept plural perspectives, particularly non-relativistic perspectives. Thus the pluralist approach actually undermines (or destroys) true encounters among sincere believers.

Wrogemann is also opposed to the intellectualizing of interreligious encounters. Part 1 closes with these words on the necessary "grounding" of interreligious relations:

When people simply assume that everybody has the freedom (more or less) to decide for or against some variant in the theology of religion, then they misjudge the social conditionality of identity in many cultures. It follows that as long as people formulate theology of religion models in a vacuum, their explanations will not sufficiently take into account the reality of interreligious relations on the ground, and their response

will thus remain inappropriate. This will be the subject of our deliberations in the following chapters. (136)

Through six chapters in part 2, Wrogemann looks at "How Islam and Buddhism View Other Religions." This title seems to uncritically accept that Islam and Buddhism are "religions;" the data within the chapter does not fit this assumption, but the root of this problem, as stated earlier, is never addressed. The focus on Islam and Buddhism puts this reviewer in an uncomfortable place, for his personal experience is overwhelmingly related to Hindu traditions. Maybe the fact that Hindu traditions so shatter the "world religions" paradigm makes it hard for Wrogemann to include them in his discussions? (In part 1 he very inadequately critiqued the Hindu-focused comparative theology of Francis Clooney, but that seemed too fine a detail to address in this review.) Wrogemann's procedure of highlighting a few intellectuals (acknowledged to be fringe people in the case of Islam) and their perspective on interreligious encounter almost seems to vitiate against his rejection of intellectualism in favor of holism. But at least there is a serious effort to listen to some voices from beyond Christendom.

Building Blocks of a New Theory

Part 3 presents in seven chapters "Building Blocks for a Theory of Interreligious Relations." This is the core of Wrogemann's call for new paradigms that broaden points of contact beyond scriptures and theology, and in the process challenge traditional views of scriptures and theology. In his introductory statement he indicates that he

will approach the subject from the angles of cultural studies, religious studies, social philosophy, and the philosophy of the social sciences to accentuate those factors that are of particular importance for interreligious relations but that generally receive little attention. (211)

The first chapter of this part (chapter 16) backs up to again attack our current theologies of religion. Six fallacies are listed, and this is some of the most helpful material in the book. First, the *rationalist* fallacy is "the presupposition that *people are guided primarily by their thought processes* and that they act according to what they hold to be true" (213; italics original). That might seem too obvious to require stating, but it brings helpful clarity regarding the inadequacy of our intellectual constructs. Wrogemann insists that "people are not consistently *guided* by any means by basic premises in the theology of religion; instead their actions are determined by multiple reference points" (214, italics original).

He emphasizes that his theory is about relations, not encounters, as the latter are fleeting and for most of the world it is long-term relations across the boundaries of religions that are important.

Second is the *individualist* fallacy, that individuals make decisions in rational ways whereas in fact relationships often determine individual decisions more than ideas do. A third fallacy Wrogemann calls the *monolinear* fallacy, and is particularly seen in the reductionism in pluralist appeals to recognize and accept others and their religious traditions. Wrogemann points out that “there is always and at the same time an entire spectrum of different positions between the poles of recognition and rejection within the complex contexts of interreligious constellations” (215, italics original).

Fourth is the *elitist* fallacy which

consists in turning a blind eye to those factors that are key for interreligious interaction—things such as liturgical and ritual performances, symbolizations, and media—which have a far greater effect on religious configurations than theological paradigms do. (215)

Fifth is the fallacy of *forgetting the body* (i.e., human corporeality) and how physicality and physical spaces impact religion and religious practices. Finally, there is a *religionist* fallacy which assumes the centrality of religious motives in all interreligious relations; “many other dimensions (historical, social, relational, societal, regional, economic, political, medial, etc.) are not considered” (216). Wrogemann’s identification of these fallacies alerts us to Western tendencies in the perception of religion.

In this same sixteenth chapter, Wrogemann goes on to spell out five theses about his theory of interreligious relations. He does not give a neat statement to his first thesis; but, this is where he comes closest to defining religion (inadequately, as I’ve already too often stated). The main point has to do with group identity, and how religion contributes to various group identities for many peoples.

A *theory of interreligious relations* takes these developments seriously, but it focuses in particular on collective we’s holding certain religiocultural worldviews and *competing with one another*. (219, italics original)

Here, as throughout the book, Wrogemann has helpful examples from different cultures across the world. He emphasizes that his theory is about *relations*, not *encounters*, as the latter are fleeting and for most of the world it is long-term relations across the boundaries of religions that are important.

His second thesis is about holism and dynamism:

...there is no such thing as religions having a fundamental nature....the phenomenon of interreligious relations is all about dynamic configurations and reconfigurations that cannot be immobilized by theology-of-religion theories. (222)

The third thesis is again about dynamism.

The point is to continually break up rigid perceptual patterns.... As we proceed with our theorizing, it will be important to show that in the field of interreligious relations, there are frequently very different factors in play to what observers generally assume. (223)

The fourth thesis is that this dynamic and multidisciplinary approach to interreligious relations must also impact the way we read the Bible. Biblical accounts are full of the very same complexities that are under discussion, so “those ways of reading these sources that promote standardization and systematization must be rejected out of hand” (224). The final thesis is again about breadth of recognition; “talking about religiosity or religion is never just a harmless exercise, but that it always has to do with aspirations and claims to social power” (236).

The six following chapters in part 3 then lay out the complexities from multi-disciplinary fields that must be wrestled with in order to genuinely confront what we call interreligious interactions. The first is identity in a chapter on “What Does *Identity* Mean: Interaction in Social Networks.” His basic perspective is to “steer clear of essentialization” (244), which is greatly appreciated but seems to be undermined by the “world religions” framework that still underlies his book. Then “inclusions and exclusions” are discussed; how are group identities sustained or fragmented?

A chapter then considers what it means to recognize and acknowledge the other. The public sphere is then discussed in another chapter that brings a perspective beyond the usual theology of religion outline. Pluralism and multiculturalism come under the microscope next, and again one of Wrogemann’s strengths is his insightful exposure of pluralistic utopias. Pluralists suggest that “good interreligious relations are *by definition* characterized by peace and harmony. These relations are not supposed to be disturbed by people changing their religious views” (292, italics original). Wrogemann suggests instead that

society is about maintaining a culture of public struggle between identities, including collective identities, in which dissent and disagreement are not seen as negatives needing to be eliminated but as resources for constructive coexistence. (295).

The closing chapter of part 3 involves an appeal for “a wide variety of methodological approaches” (297). Media studies, performance theory, “complex strategies of initiating, adjusting and perpetuating boundary-defining actions” (301), the actual actors, “individuals, groups, movements

People position themselves in different ways at the same time, so that it is possible to speak of multiple positionings, multiple locations, and various degrees of loyalty. —Wrogemann

or organizations” (302). One cannot read Wrogemann and then sit content with a neat theory about life or religion! Complexity marks everything and so must be central in all theorizing and planning.

Dialogue and Theological Formulation

Part 4 is four chapters looking at dialogue. This is again outstanding material but this review is also too long so no detailed analysis will be presented. Current attitudes and practices in dialogue are critiqued in line with points above related to reductionism, intellectualism, etc. The author’s helpful analysis of the historical error of making “religion” an “entity” in relation to “Buddhism” (326–7) again shows the problem of the larger framework of the world religions construct. Wrogemann thus lays out all the data for why “interreligious” is too loaded a term to use for his theory/theology, yet it seems he cannot find an alternative. Religion is such a central concept to global modernity that it appears inescapable, yet it seems impossible to be genuinely post-Enlightenment, post-Eurocentric, or post-colonial without finding a way to be post-religion.

Over six chapters in part 5 Wrogemann develops his theology of interreligious relations. He begins with a chapter contrasting his position with that of theology of religion approaches. His six points are important enough to outline here. First, theology of religion approaches are too abstract:

those who do not reflect on the pretensions to prestige, constellations of power, and symbolic rivalries in play in this [interreligious] context open themselves up to accusations of completely failing to recognize what really happens in interreligious relations. (351)

Second, Wrogemann objects to the focus on peace in interreligious engagement, and appeals to Jesus and the realities of religious rivalries over the centuries to show that conflict can be life promoting.

A third contrast is the selectivity of theology of religion theories, whereas Wrogemann is looking for holistic engagement. Fourth is an acceptance of the reality of “diversity within religious configurations” (355) in opposition to the static essentialisms of a theology of religion. Fifth, abstract texts are central to theology of religion whereas Wrogemann wants to also look carefully at how texts (and sections of text to neglect of other sections) are engaged and used in real life by real people. Finally, Wrogemann is again against monolinear approaches that want to define what is central; “. . . people position themselves in different ways at the same time, so that it is possible to speak of multiple positionings, multiple locations, and various degrees of loyalty” (356).

In three chapters that spell out his theological position Wrogemann is blatantly trinitarian—“The Power and Love of the One God,” “The Interreligious Communication of Jesus Christ,” and “The Fellowship of the Spirit as a Contrast Model.” Wrogemann is to be commended for his head-on approach to difficult topics throughout part 5. In discussing the one God, he addresses the jealousy of God as well as the accusation that monotheism leads to narrow-mindedness and even violence. Discussing Jesus, he accepts that “*disputations, scolding, and protest are part of the communicative repertoire of the Son of God*” (378, italics original). But he goes on to show that Jesus was unique, that we cannot follow him in all his ways, and that his teaching points to the overcoming of aggression in human relations. (This is a very inadequate summary of such rich material—something that can be said about this entire review.)

An interesting pedagogical shift enters the text with chapter 30, his chapter on the Holy Spirit. This chapter is mostly interacting with First Peter, and the chapter that follows is interaction with the book of Revelation. Peter’s epistle shows the reality of suffering for followers of Christ, yet also the centrality of praise to God in response to his grace amidst that suffering. This attractive lifestyle of disciples of Jesus is an essential part of interreligious relations. The incomprehensibility of God’s grace to us leads to “a refusal to make definitive assertions about the state of salvation of other people” (397). The tension between genuine appreciation for people outside of Christ amidst ongoing “rivalry between different worldviews and religious validity claims” mitigates against tidy theories of theologies of religion (400).

Perhaps it seems odd that a chapter following one on the Holy Spirit would focus on the book of Revelation, but Wrogemann rightly says that

it makes sense to concentrate especially on those passages among the New Testament writings that seem to contradict most patently the concern of an appreciative hermeneutics of the religious Other. (412)

The clear binary in Revelation between the followers of Christ and the enemies of Christ is analyzed in terms of the language of the powerful contrasted with the language of the oppressed. This chapter is worthy of careful study, concluding that “a contemporary theology of interreligious relations will therefore not be able to proceed by adopting such pejorative motives” (420).

Approaching the concluding chapter of part 5, his section on the theology of interreligious relations, one has come to

Wrogemann asks: “How should beauty, what is awe inspiring, and what is fascinating in other religions be understood?” His answer goes back to basic Christian theology, that God’s ways are higher than ours.

expect that Wrogemann will not provide a neat definition. Indeed, “*the task of theological theory is not to offer clear-cut explanations but to help interpret ongoing ambivalences*” (424, italics original). What is God doing in the world of multiple religions? A very helpful point in this exposition is that “*positive things can also bring on a trial of faith: How should beauty, what is awe inspiring, and what is fascinating in other religions be understood?*” (424–5, italics original). Wrogemann’s answer here goes back to basic Christian theology, that God’s ways are higher than ours and we are to live in humble praise towards him.

Then the reality of other religious traditions no longer has to be made to fit into a coherent systematic interpretation of the world; instead, we can once again entrust the both fascinating and unsettling experience of difference to God himself. (426)

Up until then [the end of time], the confession of Christ, the search for unifying truths, and the (salutary) admission of ignorance continue to be subject to the reverential recognition that God’s counsels remain hidden to us in many respects. (427)

Shifting Mission Studies

Part 6 concludes the book (and a three-volume study) with three chapters that summarize intercultural theology, mission studies and religious studies. One theme appearing here again which this review has thus far not highlighted is that Christianity is now a global phenomenon and has many varying expressions that need to be accounted for. The lived experiences of these local traditions should be central to this discussion rather than a focus on Western ratiocinations.

It is almost impossible for this reviewer to say too many positive things about this stimulating study. A trifling objection is the constant use of italics, as illustrated in many of the quotes above. This felt like the writer did not sufficiently trust the reader to understand his points. Once again in the closing chapter the nagging problem of religion raises its head, as Wrogemann expresses concern that “the definition of religion is also in danger of being eroded” (458). Well, the data in this book has not only eroded but even exploded much popular thought about world religions. A better way ahead needs to be found regarding this particular paradigm and terminology. Yet this blemish takes nothing away from the liberating perspective that Wrogemann introduces into the worlds of mission studies and theology of religion. May we live worthily in the holistic ambivalence of discipleship to Jesus in the twenty-first century.

Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom, by Darren T. Duerksen and William A. Dryness, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), x + 212 pp.

—Reviewed by Brad Gill



This month we welcomed the announcement of the third edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*.¹ Its overwhelming data and quantitative analysis cause us to expect rich diversity, surprising growth and recession, and huge gravitational shifts. And we can anticipate a wide variety of scholars to continue to

assess the data. The authors Darren Duerksen and William Dryness may find more evidence for what they see as a “crisis of church.” In their new book, *Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom*, they identify a certain confusion about the church across such a diverse Christian movement. They believe we require greater discernment as the church emerges in our day. They press us beyond traditional ecclesiology, beyond present missiological analysis, beyond any one method or strategy, and offer a new approach to interpreting the church as it arises on the frontier.

The combination of these two authors, both professors and both experienced inter-cultural practitioners, provides the reader with insights from their years of theological, religious and anthropological scholarship. They are uniquely qualified to infuse different disciplines into their missiological purpose.

The focus of this book is theological reflection on the socio-cultural formation and growth of communities that follow Christ, or in some particular ways are drawn to Christ... [W]e want to approach this in terms of emergence theory, which stipulates that social communities arise over time in ways that reflect their interaction with specific historical and cultural dynamics. (25)

Emergence theory, drawn from the pool of recent anthropological studies, is their answer to what they see as a very wide confusion concerning the church. First, they lay out the actual problem it addresses. In their first chapter they display their command of theological and historical tensions surrounding “Church and Kingdom” and “Church and Mission.” But it’s the missiological lens they apply to more recent developments in global mission (Church and Religions, Church and Culture) that helps the reader begin to see the problem and the need for a new theoretical vantage point.

Much of our missiological perception over six decades was built on the general framework of communication theory. In the dynamic equivalence theory of translation, the crux of the problem lay unnoticed.

The authors identify two flawed assumptions they believe warrant this new analysis of the church. First, the increasing globalization of religious worlds challenges the way we understand religion: “From a social science perspective the category (religion) itself is an elastic concept and is not as self-evident as is often assumed” (18). Secondly, and I believe more crucial to the overall crisis of church, is “the assumption that the church somehow exists above and apart from culture” (60). They contend that even with all the efforts of contextualizing the church over the past half a century that “cultural analysis was not used to consider the nature of the church in particular cultures” (20). That’s quite a charge. Why was that the case?

The church was considered an abstract theological reality rather than an actual community of people necessarily existing as a subculture within a larger social group. (20, italics mine)

This predicament, the assumption that the church is above culture, really propels the entire thesis of this book. With all due respect to the contributions of Andrew Walls, Eugene Nida and Charles Kraft, the authors believe we need to reframe the questions for mission anthropology. They claim that much of our missiological perception over six decades was built on the general framework of communication theory. In the dynamic equivalence theory of translation, the crux of the problem lay unnoticed.

But, important as this advance was, it carried limitations; the church does not exist like a text waiting to be communicated. It is rather a *dynamic, culturally situated emergent reality* that is formed under multiple influences. (20, italics mine)

They have culled through that theoretical jungle of recent anthropological studies and in chapter 3 they offer a new tool in emergence theory (“Emergent Ecclesial Identity and Mission”). They don’t swallow this theory uncritically, but they use it to explain how the church is a “process of interaction between a context and persons and what results out of that interaction” (65).

They offer four case studies of how the church has culturally manifested across the globe (chapter 4) which make it crystal clear why this is a key textbook for frontier missiology. They combine their research and experience in Japan, Indonesia, South Asia and Philippines to “discover and interrogate ways in which those settings have encouraged or obstructed the emergence of a stable entity that can

reasonably be called a church.” (83) These cases show that context matters:

This review carries forward the assumption we are making that the possibilities for the emergence of the church in any place are dependent in large part on reigning assumptions of what human community looks like—its limits and its possibilities. (83)

But in the second half of the book, the authors assure us that this emergent process is nourished by similar biblical sources and expresses some general characteristics. A subtheme of the book is to provide “a process of discerning where the church exists” (25), so the authors devote chapters to common “Biblical Metaphors for Church” (chapter 5), the origins of “Theological Practices of Church” (chapter 6), and the “Markers of Transformative Church” (chapter 7). They also claim that an eschatological vision will play into the emergence of church (chapter 8).

Throughout the book, they view this emergence perspective from complimentary disciplines—an integration which is the very warp and woof of missiology. This weaving together of theology, history, anthropology and actual ministry contexts catalyzes insights for the reader, especially those ministering in frontier situations where an initial turning to Christ is taking place. Insights seem to almost pop out at the reader. I will highlight just two examples:

First, their theological command is apparent in chapter 6 where they address the origins of theological practices (baptism, eucharist, etc.) in any new context. In dealing with the biblical metaphor “body of Christ” in chapter 5, they make a quick reference to Miroslav Volf who “argues that the ‘body of Christ’ should be interpreted from the perspective of the man and woman becoming one body” (117). Rather than the typical emphasis on the organic unity of the different parts of the body, the body metaphor speaks of the emergence of a new entity as in a marriage becoming one body, a new entity, a new unity, a new communion of persons. “For Paul, being ‘united in the same mind and for the same purpose’ (1 Cor. 1:10) is not about being a part of the same ecclesial body but about being in communion with Christ and each other” (117).

They believe Volf’s emphasis resonates with emergent theory. The reader senses the compelling theological relevance for any frontier situation: initial believers in unreached contexts emerge first of all as a new communion of persons.

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One hears a rationale for the way new movements today emphasize obedience to the Scriptures. Who would have thought unpacking the Reformation with a reverse hermeneutic would transform our understanding of these movements?

Their communion in the Spirit is what constitutes a new entity (church), not a certain type of organic unity. “For Volf, each local church is a church and is connected to the entire communion of those ‘in Christ’ as an anticipation of ‘the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God’” (117).

A second example is the way historical perspective buttresses their cultural analysis. They map out “The Church as an Emergent Phenomenon in History” (chapter 2) by reinterpreting familiar eras of church history (the first century, the Reformation) with their tool of emergence theory. They apply a “critical realism” that appreciates both the influence of human agency (the Apostles, Calvin) and of unique social conditions (Greco-Roman associations, Church and State). It’s in this kind of dialectic that they introduce what they call a “reverse hermeneutic.”

Hermeneutics has traditionally described the process of drawing out meaning from Scripture. What if we were to reverse this hermeneutical direction and use the values and insights of culture to illuminate aspects of Scripture? Alternatively, how might these serve to obscure or distort those readings? . . . We make use of the idea of reversing the hermeneutical flow in order to illustrate *the way historical forms of church have necessarily reflected, for better or worse, prevailing cultural forms and practices.* (28, italics mine)

Admittedly, for some this reverse hermeneutic is simply a new label for the cultural influences they’ve recognized all along in church history. However, these authors demonstrate how a reverse hermeneutic can help explain a World Christianity that extends in such diversity today.

In their short section, “Hearing and Obeying Christ” (154–157), one can’t help but hear a rationale for the way new movements today emphasize *obedience* to the Scriptures. One thinks of the global phenomena of Disciple-Making Movements (DMM) and the *obedience-based discipleship* so fundamental to their growth. But who would have thought unpacking the Reformation with a reverse hermeneutic (39–51) would have any relevance to our understanding of these movements? These authors begin and end their argument over four centuries of church history, and they interlace biblical and anthropological perspectives in re-establishing “hearing and obeying Christ” as a true marker of the church. I would summarize their argument as follows:

- **Historical:** The socio-religious conditions of the Reformation led the reformers to emphasize the church as a “Word-event,” as a “creature of the word,” and established preaching and proclamation as one of the markers of a true church.
- **Linguistic:** A “cargo” mentality of communication became the prevailing paradigm in evangelical mission,

one in which the message was packaged according to the presenter’s understanding. Receivers then had to be educated to understand it. In the mid-twentieth century Eugene Nida introduced his dynamic-equivalence theory and this began to shift the paradigm to a receptor-oriented communication.

- **Anthropological:** We understand we’re not just delivering a package, but we’re engaged in a process. E. Daniel Shaw claims we must go beyond contextualization and focus on the “cognitive apparatus” that hears and processes the Word-event.
- **Biblical:** We see this process displayed in Acts and in Paul and the concern with what the receivers do with the Word. Abraham is the paradigmatic example of this “positive reception,” and his faithful obedience is the primary sign of his identity with God and His covenant.
- **Hermeneutical:** Again, by using a reverse hermeneutic, David Bosch notes that over the last 150 years Western evangelicals have desired to counter relativistic theologies by preaching salvation. Consequently, the emphasis on “going” and preaching to the nations in the Great Commission of Matt. 28: 19–20 eclipsed the second part of that command (“teaching them to *obey* everything I have commanded”).

A reverse hermeneutic makes clear how the prevailing cultural conditions of a Reformation period helped shape an emphasis on hearing the Word (word-event), and how there was a gradual clouding of our ability to discern obedience as a genuine marker of a transformative church.

Duerksen and Dyrness have contributed a very effective tool for sharpening our missiological discernment. Their cultural analysis is a fresh way to perceive the past, study the present, and aim into the future. It comes at an appropriate moment, when we still face a huge proportion of unreached peoples and populations. Emergence theory should be deployed in our approach, and not wait till our methods and strategies are unfruitful—when the open and voluntary church meets closed communities; when churches fail to fully incorporate back-row believers; when the relational flow of a disciple-making movement is inhibited by an urban jungle. It certainly answers any confusion about the church on today’s frontiers. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Todd M. Johnson and Gina Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd. ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), This item is not yet published. It is available for pre-orders and will ship on 01 February 2020. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/world-christian-encyclopedia-9781474403238?cc=us&clang=en&#>.

In Others' Words

Editor's Note: In this department, we highlight resources outside of the IJFM: other journals, print resources, DVDs, websites, blogs, videos, etc. Standard disclaimers on content apply. Due to the length of many web addresses, we sometimes give just the title of the resource, the main web address, or a suggested search phrase.

Armenian Genocide Recognized

Was this an act of retaliation against Turkey for sending in troops in October against the SDF (the Syrian Kurdish army), US allies against ISIS? After dilly-dallying for decades, the US Congress finally passed a bill December 12, 2019, officially declaring the Armenian massacres of the late 1890s and 1915–1923, a genocide. (See *Christianity Today's* article [“Senate's Genocide Vote Not the Only Good News for Armenian Christians,”](#) December 13, 2019.) For a stark summary of the genocide facts, take a look at this archived *New York Times* article: [“Armenian Genocide of 1915: An Overview.”](#)

Germans and Kurds Ask Forgiveness for Genocide Role

Both Germany and the Kurds are beginning to acknowledge their own roles in the genocide. See the article in *DW (Deutsche Welle)* entitled [“New Report Details Germany's Involvement in Armenian Genocide”](#) (May 2018) and a 2015 *Public Radio International (PRI)* article written at the time of the 100th anniversary of the genocide April 24, 2015 entitled, [“Kurds in Turkey Atone for their Role in the Armenian Genocide.”](#) Abdallah Demirbas, a Kurdish politician and former mayor of the once Armenian city of Diyarbakur in Eastern Turkey, was quoted as saying that

they have an obligation to grant others the right as well to live their identities fully. This includes Armenians and other groups like Assyrians, Arabs, and religious minorities like Alevis and Yezidis. Part of this vision is apologizing for our part in the genocide.

During his tenure as mayor, in 2012 his city erected the only monument commemorating the genocide in Turkey. Not surprisingly, a few months later Demirbas was [arrested](#). For a thought-provoking interview with Demirbas in 2016, see this Open Democracy article: [opendemocracy.net/en/sur-against-state-violence-in-turkey-interview-with-former-mayor-ab/](#).

Martin Accad's Syria Brief on the Kurds

Martin Accad, recent plenary speaker at the September annual meetings of the Evangelical Society of Missiology, makes some perceptive comments about Kurds, Arabs, and Iran in an Institute for Middle East Studies (IMES) December 4th blog called [“Syria Brief: December 2019.”](#) He is Associate Professor of Islamic Studies for the Arab Theological Seminary

in Beirut. As an Arab Christian, he wonders how a people known for their historic genocides against Armenians and other Christians have somehow become the darling of US politicians. A good question. A second IMES blog by another faculty member, Mike Kuhn, at the Arab Theological Seminary in Beirut, addresses [the history of the nation-state](#) and how that has contributed to current geopolitical problems.

For a political understanding of the historical relationship between the Kurds and the governments of Iran, Iraq, Israel, and the US see the excellent article in *Foreign Policy* entitled [“The Secret Origins of the U.S.–Syrian Relationship Explain Today's Disaster.”](#) Also, don't miss the extended article in *The New Yorker*, October 24, 2019, entitled [“Turkey, Syria, the Kurds, and Trump's Abandonment of Foreign Policy.”](#) Last, for a lovely story about a Syrian Christian graduate student in the US who was invited to speak at Harvard University's commencement, see this *Christianity Today* article, also an IMES blog, [“The Road From Damascus: How a Syrian Christian Spoke at Harvard's Commencement.”](#)

Why Are People Protesting All over the World?

Massive civilian protests have erupted in Iran ([“Iran Convulsed by Worst Unrest in 40 Years”](#)), Iraq ([“Our Patience is Over: Why Iraqis are Protesting,”](#)) and Lebanon (see *BBC News'* November 7, 2019, article, [“Lebanon Protests: How WhatsApp Tax Anger Revealed a Much Deeper Crisis”](#)). Some of the causes? Corrupt governments, [exorbitant fuel](#) and food prices, [a ten-day internet blackout](#) (Iran), no working utilities, and (in the case of Iraq and Lebanon), the [presence of Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops](#). Don't miss the *Guardian's* December 5, 2019, article: [“How Street Protests Across Middle East Threaten Iran's Power.”](#) And for how Iraqi Christians have been affected by these huge protests, see the *Express* article, December 25, 2019: [“Iraq Protests: Christians Heartened by Muslims' Solidarity in midst of Bloody Crackdown.”](#) By contrast, Sudan's mass protests last year led to a peaceful transition of power. Just this week, the new government revoked an incendiary law that had restricted and targeted women. (See the *BBC News* article [“Sudan Crisis: Women Praise End of Strict Public Order Law,”](#) November 29, 2019.)

India: A New Dark Age?

[“India Is Entering a New Dark Age,”](#) published November 19, 2019 in *The Week*, contends that

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is going backwards on every front: Its economy is in a free-fall (with growth at a six-year low and unemployment at [a 45-year high](#)); its polity is becoming authoritarian; and its dominant religion, Hinduism, is growing intolerant. But what's even more depressing is that the country seems to have lost its will to fight this descent into darkness.

Don't miss *The New Yorker's* December 2019 cover article about India, [“Blood and Soil in Narendra Modi's India.”](#) Written by Pulitzer-Prize winning veteran war correspondent

Dexter Filkins (who accompanied Indian journalist Rana Ayoub into Kashmir), it gives an excellent historical background to the treatment of Muslims in India since the partition.

Riots Roil India over Anti-Muslim Bill

To add insult to injury, Muslims (immigrants and refugees) are no longer allowed to apply for citizenship. A new citizenship bill just passed the upper house of parliament December 11, 2019, and became law, but will almost certainly be appealed to the country's Supreme Court: "Constitutional lawyers believe that inserting a faith criterion for citizenship contradicts as many as three articles of the country's eloquently secular constitution." (See "[India's New Citizenship Law Outrages Muslims](#)," Dec 12, 2019, *The Economist*.) A December 13, 2019 article in the *Guardian* entitled "[Violent Clashes Continue in Delhi over New Citizenship Bill](#)," gives more details about the nationwide riots and protests. For more on how this citizenship bill might affect the state-less Rohingya refugees already in India, see the December 11, 2019 article in Human Rights Watch: "[India: Citizenship Bill Discriminates Against Muslims](#)."

Is "Panta Ta Ethne" Ethnolinguistic?

You should continue to track with the developing analysis of "unreached people groups" as a strategic way of portraying today's mission. The [recent contribution](#) by Matthew Newkirk in a December 9, 2019 article answers [the critiques](#) in *The Gospel Coalition* by pointing out the Old Testament context of the original Abrahamic covenant ("to be a blessing to all the families of the earth"). Genesis 10 and 11 (the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel) provide "the strong ethnolinguistic undercurrent that surges throughout the early Abrahamic narrative." (See "[Should Missionaries Focus on the Unreached People Groups? Yes.](#)")

Hong Kong Election Landslide

Hong Kong protests have been ongoing for more than seven months now. But in the November 24th election, pro-democracy candidates won an astonishing seventeen out of eighteen councils. "The turnout, of over 70%, was higher than any recorded in any kind of election in Hong Kong in which the public has a say." (See "[Hong Kong Elections Were a Rebuke to its Government](#)," *The Economist*, November 30, 2019.) And more than [800,000 people](#) came out to demonstrate their support the following weekend. For a Hong Kong Christian's analysis of how the continuing massive Hong Kong protests are impacting believers, check out *China Source's* December 11, 2019 article entitled, "[Recognizing Spiritual Warfare behind Social Unrest](#)," by Ji Yajie.

Leaked Xinjiang Papers Spark Outrage

Two separate explosive leaks of highly classified Chinese government documents have ignited an uproar around the world. The first set, (twenty-four documents or 490 pages now being called the Xinjiang Papers,) was leaked to the *New York Times*

by an anonymous high level Chinese political official and published in its entirety in English and Chinese, November 16, 2019. See "[Absolutely No Mercy: Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims](#)." One of the Xinjiang Papers instructs officials how to question and reassure elite Uighur university students who, upon returning for the summer from their universities in other parts of China, discovered their families, relatives, and neighbors completely missing.

A second set of five more documents was leaked anonymously to the *ICIJ*, the *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*. Dubbed the China Cables, and published online in an article entitled, "[Exposed: China's Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm](#)," November 24, 2019, these documents detail the actual prison-like protocols for preventing escapes.

Artificial Intelligence and Chinese Gulags

Quoting the above article, the China Cables expose the role of mass data collection and computer algorithms:

The classified intelligence briefings reveal the scope and ambition of the government's artificial-intelligence-powered policing platform, which purports to predict crimes based on these computer-generated findings alone. Experts say the platform, which is used in both policing and military contexts, demonstrates the power of technology to help drive industrial-scale human rights abuses.

The China Cables reveal how the system is able to amass vast amounts of intimate personal data through warrantless manual searches, facial recognition cameras, and other means to identify candidates for detention, flagging for investigation hundreds of thousands merely for using certain popular mobile phone apps. The documents detail explicit directives to arrest Uighurs with foreign citizenship and to track Xinjiang Uighurs living abroad, some of whom have been deported back to China by authoritarian governments. Among those implicated as taking part in the global dragnet: China's embassies and consulates. ("[Exposed: China's Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm](#)," *ICIJ*, November 24, 2019)

Over 1000 Uighur Camps Located

Meanwhile, Uighur activists (using Google Earth) have documented the precise location and coordinates of 500 new camps and internment centers. Anders Corr, an analyst who formerly worked in US intelligence and who advised the group, said that around forty percent of the sites had not been previously reported. Rights advocates have generally estimated that China is detaining more than one million Uighurs and members of other predominantly Muslim Turkic ethnicities. But Randall Schriver, the top Pentagon official for Asia, said in May that the figure was "likely closer to three million citizens"—an extraordinary number in a region of some 20 million people (quoted in the *Asia Times* November 13, 2019 article "[Researchers Shed Light on China's Uighur Camps](#)"). **IJFM**

Whether you're a Perspectives instructor, student, or coordinator, you can continue to explore issues raised in the course reader and study guide in greater depth in **IJFM**. For ease of reference, each **IJFM** article in the table below is tied thematically to one or more of the 15 Perspectives lessons, divided into four sections: Biblical (B), Historical (H), Cultural (C) and Strategic (S). *Disclaimer: The table below shows where the content of a given article might fit; it does not imply endorsement of a particular article by the editors of the Perspectives materials.* For sake of space, the table only includes lessons related to the articles in a given **IJFM** issue. To learn more about the Perspectives course, visit www.perspectives.org.

Articles in IJFM 36:4

	Lesson 6: The Expansion of the World Christian Movement (H)	Lesson 7: Eras of Mission History (H)	Lesson 8: Pioneers of the World Christian Movement (H)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
Reimagining Witness beyond our Modern Mission Paradigm Michael W. Stroope (pp. 163–68)	X	X		X	X	
Sacred Misinterpretation across the Christian-Muslim Divide Martin Accad (pp. 173–78)	X	X		X		X
Cameron Townsend and the Radicalization of the Faith Mission Paradigm Boone Aldridge (pp. 181–87)		X	X			X
Moving Beyond: Frontier Missions in Our Postcolonial World Bradford Greer (pp. 189–200)				X	X	X

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	Lesson 6: The Expansion of the World Christian Movement (H)	Lesson 7: Eras of Mission History (H)	Lesson 8: Pioneers of the World Christian Movement (H)	Lesson 10: How Shall They Hear? (C)	Lesson 11: Building Bridges of Love (C)	Lesson 14: Pioneer Church Planting (S)
Reimagining Witness beyond our Modern Mission Paradigm Michael W. Stroope (pp. 163–68)	X	X		X	X	
Sacred Misinterpretation across the Christian-Muslim Divide Martin Accad (pp. 173–78)	X	X		X		X
Cameron Townsend and the Radicalization of the Faith Mission Paradigm Boone Aldridge (pp. 181–87)		X	X			X
Moving Beyond: Frontier Missions in Our Postcolonial World Bradford Greer (pp. 189–200)				X	X	X

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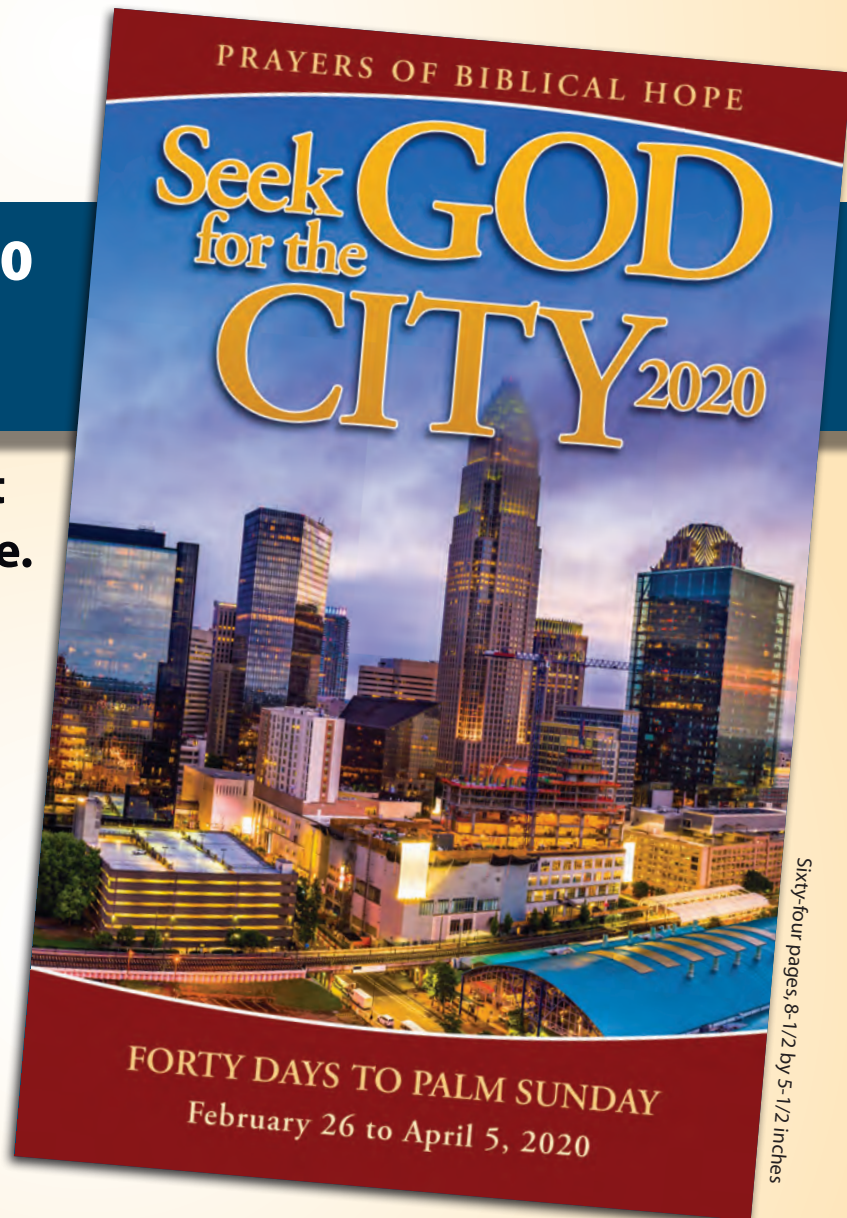
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