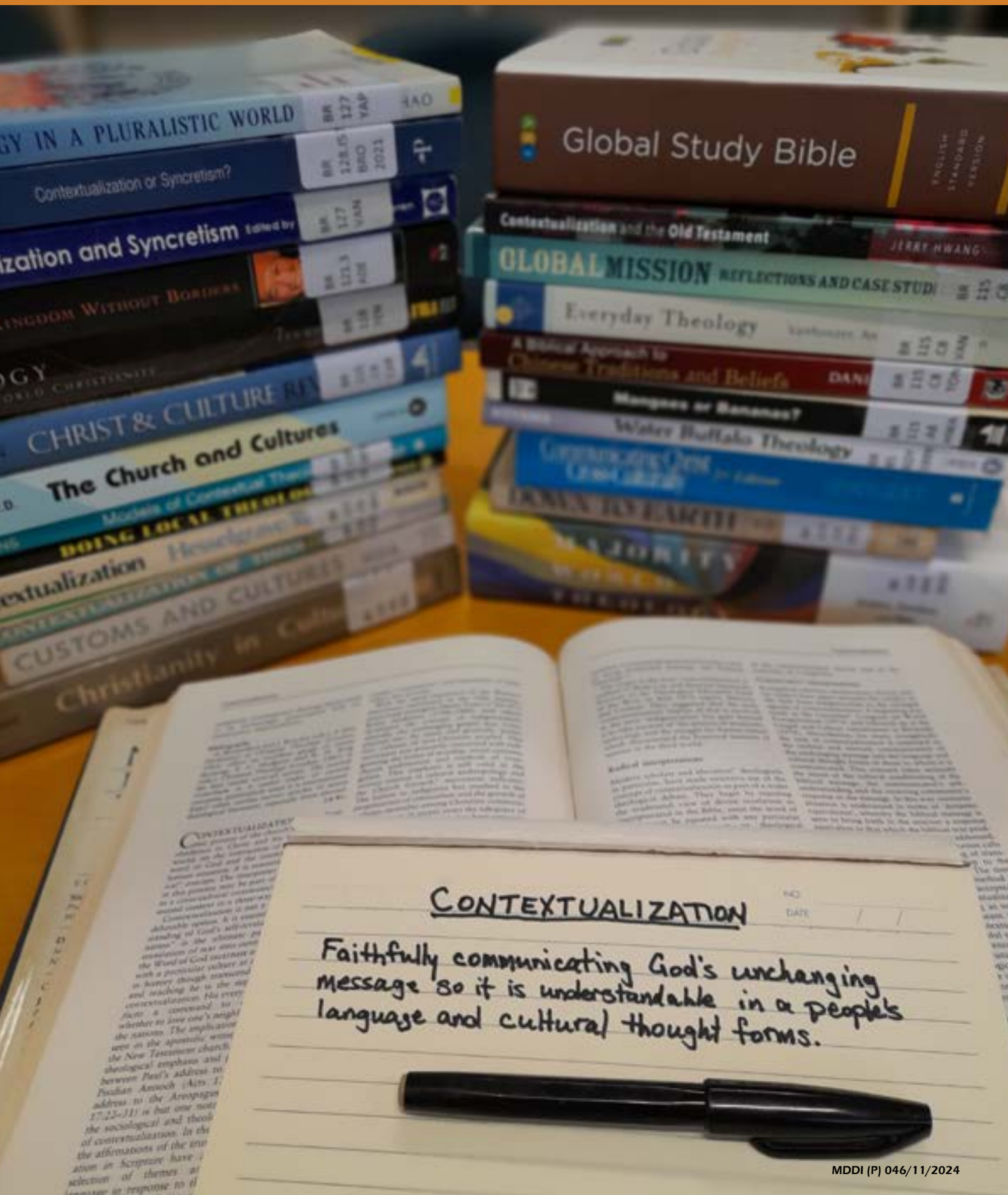
Vol. 20 No. 2 May–August 2025

Mission Round Table

The OMF Journal for Reflective Practitioners



MDDI (P) 046/11/2024

Contents

Mission Round Table Vol. 20 No. 2 May–August 2025

03 **Editorial**
– *Walter McConnell*

04 **Wisdom from the East: Lessons from the Mission Effort of the Syriac Church**
– *Paul Woods*

14 **Thoughts on Contextualization**
– *Lewis White*

22 **Culture, Cultural Diversity, and the Good Life: Reflections on Creation and Its Implications for the Church**
– *Daniel*

30 **"Mission With"—Moving Beyond Reductionism**
– *Sam Wunderli*

38 **The Seoul Statement in the Lausanne Tradition: A First Missiological Analysis**
– *Tianji Ma*

Photo credits: Naomi Ghent (36), Kelly LaPiana (33), Roddy Mackay (23), Walter McConnell (cover), Tim Pfennigwerth (20).

Donations:

If you would like to help cover production costs of *Mission Round Table*, you can send your gift earmarked for Project P74063 to any OMF center. Please visit omf.org/contact for more information.

Download:

PDF versions of *Mission Round Table* can be downloaded from www.omf.org/mrt.

Subscribe:

The editorial content of *Mission Round Table* reflects the opinions of the various authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the views of OMF International (IHQ) Ltd.

© 2025 by OMF International (IHQ) Ltd.

Editor: Walter McConnell walter.mcconnell@omfmail.com
Contributing Editor: Claire McConnell claire.mcconnell@omfmail.com
Editorial Office: int.research@omfmail.com
Graphic Design and Printing: IK Marketing & Productions
Printing: Yung Shung Printrade Pte Ltd

Mission Round Table is published by the Mission Research Department
OMF International (IHQ) Ltd., 2 Cluny Road, Singapore 259570

Editorial

Walter McConnell

The cover of our present issue illustrates that while stacks of books have been written on contextualization, most practitioners find it easier to condense the idea into a simple, easy-to-grasp statement—as some might say, something that you could print on a T-shirt. The concept, however, is so vast and complex and has been explained in sometimes conflicting ways that a simple statement can never satisfy. It is therefore essential that people who share the good news of Jesus Christ with others read and think about contextualization. And while this will help them understand the topic, it will, more importantly, help them to practice it rightly in their ministry setting.

Thinking contextually can help us as we work through some very important questions that constantly pop up in our work. How can we share the gospel with people who have no background in the Bible and may view Christianity as a foreign or even a false religion? How do we help them rightly grasp and accept this story about the one true God who made all things and sent his Son into the world to become a man and die for sinful people so that their relationship with God could be made right? How much more biblical teaching do they need to "accept" or "believe" the gospel and be "saved"? How do we communicate this if they don't see religion as something to believe and see no need for salvation? How do they understand the words we use for God, sin, Christianity, church, and so much more? What other concepts will they struggle with? Do we need to change our terminology or explanations to communicate better? What words can we use and what difference will this make?

These questions highlight our need to think clearly about how a person's language and culture influence their hearing of the gospel. They should also force us to consider how our language and culture has influenced our hearing of the gospel and how we pass it on to others. As you read this issue, constantly center on your own context and the context of the people with whom you work. Try to see how you can better understand God's truth and communicate it to them.

Our first article demonstrates how the interaction of the Church of the East in the first Christian millennium with others presents us with an excellent example of how this can be done. Not only does Paul Woods describe the missionary zeal exhibited by our early Syrian brothers and sisters, he also challenges us to learn from their practice. These ancient Christians have much to teach us about three-self principles and missionary life. Though they were mainly bi-vocational missionaries working as merchants, medical doctors, and administrators, they were also well trained in Scripture and entered into deep dialogues with the people among whom they lived, discerning appropriate methods to share Jesus and equipping their hearers to live out the life of faith in their world. While we shouldn't mimic them uncritically, their engagement with the world should give us reason to consider how we can improve in our witness for Christ.

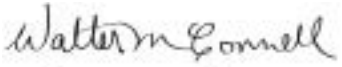
In "Thoughts on Contextualization," Lewis White encourages us to recall how Hudson Taylor's interaction with Chinese people forced him to evaluate his message and even the clothes he wore in the light of potential misunderstandings. White then shows us ways we can contextualize the gospel in our context, warns us that those undergoing cultural change can face the twin pitfalls of assimilation and syncretism, and urges us to learn how culture works from local believers and act upon it. This article will remind some readers of things they learned years ago while preparing for mission and serve as a well-needed introduction to many others. Let's make sure to act upon what we learn so that God's good news will be rightly understood by the people we work with.

Writing about, "Culture, Cultural Diversity, and the Good Life," Daniel tells how he has faced the tension that exists between the desire to have the gospel contextualized for a given culture and the aspiration of establishing intercultural churches where people from different background worship together. He finds that despite the ideal of worshipping with others, "there is no blueprint … for being a church that embodies Christian unity in cultural diversity." Nevertheless, he finds the basic cultural teachings in Genesis on the unity of humankind are strengthened by the coming of Christ and encourages us that, where possible, we should bring people from different cultures together to worship our one Lord.

The last two articles move us on from contextualization to address other important issues. In "'Mission With'—Moving Beyond Reductionism," Sam Wunderli addresses some recent suggestions on where our priority in mission should be placed. He clearly articulates his understanding that since the church can be found throughout the world, our mission focus should not insist that we send our people to a place but that we work with people from many places as we join God in his work of calling the nations together.

Toward the end of September last year, the Lausanne movement held its Fourth Congress in Seoul, South Korea. In addition to bringing Christians together from all over the globe, the Congress produced "The Seoul Statement" to be a contemporary reflection on biblical convictions and values. Having attended the congress, Ma Tianji reflects on "The Seoul Statement in the Lausanne Tradition" to see how it works with and builds upon the earlier statements produced in Lausanne, Manila, and Cape Town and how it addresses some concerns raised by the earlier statements.

May we all reflect upon what we read, find ways to use these ideas in our own work, and encourage others to do so as well.



Editor, *Mission Round Table*

Wisdom from the East:
Lessons from the Mission Effort of the Syriac Church

Paul Woods



Paul Woods has previously worked with doctoral students at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and master's students at Singapore Bible College. Before that, he served as OMF's language and culture consultant in Singapore and for the Mekong Field based in Chiang Mai. He now has a new role as outward-facing Theological Educator at Large within OMF (UK).

Introduction

In the first five centuries of the Christian era, the Syriac Church of the East covered the largest geographical area of any of the various branches of the church. This church, often known as the Nestorians,[1] had its home in Persia and gradually spread east, partly as a result of persecutions due to doctrinal differences with the mainstream Christianity of Constantinople.[2] The Syriac Church planted churches and monasteries across Central Asia, Mongolia, and China, with significant presences in Samarkand, Kashgar, and Xian.[3] Between the seventh and tenth centuries, Syriac Christianity was known in China as Jingjiao (景教, lit. *Luminous Religion*). The Church of the East sent its missionaries and exerted influence all over Asia, from Persia in the West to Japan in the East and from Mongolia in the North to the Straits of Malacca in the south.[4] There is evidence its members influenced the Chinese court and the Mongolian emperors; in the latter case, the wives of several important political figures were Syriac Christians.[5]

The doctrinal difference between the Church of the East (abbreviated to COE) and the dominant Greek theological mainstream was subtle and of little consequence for a mission-focused paper. The Syriac Church believed that Christ's divine and human natures existed within one human being but not according to the hypostasis accepted by the mainstream. In addition, there was a dispute over whether Mary the mother of Christ should be considered *Theotokos* (bearer of God) or *Christotokos* (bearer of Christ).[6] These two doctrinal positions, associated with Bishop Nestorius, were deemed heretical at the ecumenical councils of Ephesus (431 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD). However, in his magnum opus on the mission enterprise of the COE, Stewart suggests that the term "Nestorian" generally refers to the church in "later centuries"[7] and the labelling of Nestorius as heretical may have been unjust.[8]

Orientation to the mission enterprise of the Church of the East

As the Church of the East became more powerful in Persia in the late fifth century, its missionary efforts became stronger and started to include territories around the Persian Gulf.[9] Three centuries later, during the patriarchate of Timothy I, the COE was at its most powerful in the Arab world.[10] Ultimately, the Syriac Church carried out mission work across a vast region stretching from its Persian-influenced homeland all the way to Turfan, already seen as part of the broader Chinese world.[11] The court of Tang China recognised the COE from the middle of the seventh to the middle of the ninth century.[12] Five hundred years later, the influence and mission of the COE in Central and East Asia were in steep decline.[13]

At its height, the COE's mission work was both well led and well organized.[14] Baumer praises it as "the most successful missionary church in the world."[15] Their expansion into Central Asia and China was actively supported by senior clergy,[16] although unlike many later western church groups, there was no association with political power, nation, or empire.[17]

Nicolini-Zani describes the missionary dynamism of the Church of the East, linking its inherently pluralistic character with its origin among the scattered and multiethnic Christians of the Antioch church in Acts 13.[18] The church's original geographical base was Persia, which separated it from the Greek and later Latin/Roman cultural, philosophical, and linguistic influences that determined the theological and missional trajectories of the Western Church.

Having briefly introduced the Church of the East, I now look at various facets of its mission endeavour, summarising each one and then considering the

implications for evangelical missions today, while remaining mindful of our separation in time and space.

Elements of the mission approach of the Church of the East

Various aspects of the mission effort of the COE are potentially of interest to modern evangelical mission theorists and practitioners. Stewart's *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise* provided a framework for and details of the Syriac church's gospel work. I then supplemented content from this admittedly rather dated study by reference to a wide range of more modern resources.

It is striking that, writing in 1928, Stewart suggests that the missionary work of the COE has much to teach "the more highly developed organizations of to-day," particularly with regard to planting self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches.[19] Reading the accounts of Stewart and many others at the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century brings a mixture of excitement and caution. Some aspects of the Syriac church's mission practice are worth studying and reflecting on, yet we cannot simply map from the seventh century to the twenty-first.

The COE functioned and carried out its mission activity in a world very different from our own. Their missionaries and lay preachers were able to move across vast areas of territory with few of the modern constraints of nation states, governments, and visas. At the same time, they probably served in a more dangerous environment than most missionaries today. A significant difference between mission in the two contexts, not evident in the literature, is time—people travelled primarily on foot or on horseback and sometimes by boat. The process of moving eastward, whether as a missionary in the formal sense or as a Christian professional (categories that we will come to see as a little anachronistic), would have taken a long time and this would have been reflected in people's expectations.

The Syriac Church was a Middle Eastern group with thought processes and organisational logic very different from modern, evangelical mission, whose strongly North Atlantic character and corporate influences have brought us mission and vision statements, strategy, key performance indicators, and a plethora of tools, approaches, and acronyms. In addition, not everything from the Syriac Church is perfect and, despite our own self-directed criticisms and soul-searching, the mission endeavour of the last seventy years or so has much to commend it. In studying the mission record of the COE and considering how it might speak to us, I have looked for points of contact, found resonances, and identified themes that could be adopted, but only if adapted as well.

Bi-vocational missionaries

In the early days of the COE's missionary effort, it was likely that there was little formal organization. Stewart argues that this proto-mission resembled that of Paul in the Book of Acts, as tentmakers (in the modern parlance) travelled as traders and craftsmen, supporting themselves and sharing the gospel as they went.[20] This basic approach continued as the COE moved into Central and East Asia[21] and people accepted the gospel after hearing the testimony "of Christian merchants and physicians."[22] Worthing devotes a whole article to the missionary and medical contributions of physicians from the Syriac Church.[23] Other members of the COE helped develop alphabets for peoples in Central Asia and beyond.[24]

COE missionaries (in the broadest sense) shared the gospel in the context of their occupations, having been given a solid understanding of their faith and the cultures of those around them. In the eleventh century, a Kerait king (a group later absorbed into the Mongol empire) decided to become a Christian and had merchants from the COE brought to his camp to explain the gospel to him.[25] Some Syriac Christians even used *merchant* as a metaphor for *mission worker*, linking travel for trade purposes with the conversion of people along the way.[26] Sogdian traders were known for their role in transferring ideas from various religions among the people they met. Baumer suggests that, by their diffusion of gospel ideas, Christian Sogdians effectively made way for "subsequent monastic missionaries."[27]

Others who went east for the purposes of the gospel supported themselves directly through their work or as employees of local rulers.[28] Some COE believers helped administer



A stone from the Yuan dynasty with a cross and Syriac inscription, found in Fangshan District near Beijing (called Khanbaliq or Dadu in the Yuan dynasty). The verse is the first half of Psalms 34:5. Photo by Trevor Powell, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

cities and local districts while others became influential in the royal courts of potentates in Central Asia and Mongolia. In some locations, such learned COE Christians were even seen as a "guild" or society that influenced the caliph.[29] Stewart notes that one Sigatsy, viceroy of Samarkand, became a Christian.[30] Over time, local people who had joined the church served as advisers and viziers in these settings too. In Kublai Khan's court, there were envoys, advisers, and interpreters who pledged allegiance to Christ and the Church of the East. The missionary Alopen, generally acknowledged as the COE missionary who took the gospel to China in the sixth century, was most likely an official envoy of the Persian state. The devotion to education and scholarship among the COE was such that when Caliph Mamun founded his "House of Knowledge" in Baghdad in the ninth century, this Muslim leader appointed the Syriac Christian Hunain ibn Ishaq as its leader.[31] According to Mingana, the COE was greatly respected by non-Christian rulers in Central Asia, so much so that when they met the Christian patriarch, they would remove their hats and go down on one knee.[32] One is reminded of Daniel in the Old Testament, who combined a love for God with knowledge of his own faith and that of the Babylonians; he also served rulers who did not recognise Yahweh but without compromising his principles.

The last few decades have seen the emergence of various combinations of

mission work and professional service: Business as Mission (BAM), missional business, and tentmaking might be considered subtle variants of a basic form of bi-vocational mission work.[33] This is a vast area of missiological research, an adequate treatment of which is beyond this short article. What sometimes seems chosen—almost as a last resort for a CAN context—was widely used in less restrictive contexts in the past. I believe that the Church of the East might ask why we are not doing more Business as Mission kind of ministry in *open* access countries and even why it is not central to contemporary mission practice and mobilisation. It seems that for the Syriac church doing business or carrying on one's profession was completely integrated with proclamation and demonstration of the faith. They were two parts of a whole and there was no need to justify tentmaking and apparently no concept of "platforms" for ministry. There are also parallels with the mission approach of the Moravians in the late eighteenth century.[34]

… the Church of the East might ask why we are not doing more Business as Mission kind of ministry in open access countries and even why it is not central to contemporary mission practice and mobilisation. It seems that for the Syriac church doing business or carrying on one's profession was completely integrated with proclamation and demonstration of the faith. They were two parts of a whole and there was no need to justify tentmaking and apparently no concept of "platforms" for ministry.

Apart from doing business, part of the COE mission force was skilled tentmakers who earned the trust of political and cultural leaders. It might be difficult to transfer this aspect of Syriac mission into our evangelical mission contexts, yet we do hear of mission personnel with access to governments and policymakers at surprisingly high levels, often in creative access nations. Within their own different cultures and ministry situations, it appears that the COE was engaged in a form of mission akin to modern integral mission.[35] If we researched and identified opportunities and matched these with suitable personnel with a track record of expertise in secular contexts in their own countries, there could be scope to train and sustain highly skilled specialists whose sheer knowledge and integrity make them deeply attractive to government, business, or educational spheres in countries that remain indifferent or resistant to the gospel. In addition, the Great Commission statement of Matthew 28 not only sends us out, but implies that this is a task for all believers, with the aim of making disciples. The building of relationships in specific life and work contexts is essential to the task of discipling. Naturally, an emphasis on tentmaking and integral mission does not deny the importance of gospel proclamation and church planting and there are resonances with the ministry of the linguist and administrator William Carey.[36]

Use of existing trade routes

Jenkins highlights the importance of trade routes in the mission of the Syriac Church,[37] missionary-merchants using roads and settlements established for decades or even centuries to carry on their trading business and diffuse the gospel as they went. It may have been easier to move from one territory to another in ancient times, missionary expansion aided by the lack of formal borders between states.[38] According to Gillman and Klimkeit, this strategy helped make the COE church the most widely spread Christian group in the world in the early middle ages.[39]

Hansen sees the Silk Road itself as an essential element in the relations between and transmission of different faiths. People and cultures all along the trade route were open to interreligious discourse in the atmosphere of great tolerance that existed before the arrival of Islam. The complex cultures and their interactions made the Silk Road a natural channel for faith to move eastwards and westwards,[40] and the diverse background of many Syriac Christians made them well-placed to take advantage of such an established conduit for ideas. In addition, "caravan cities" emerged along the Silk Road that served as centres of influence for the COE.[41] Roland Allen points out that the Apostle Paul also focused on influential commercial centres.[42]

In our modern age of containers and air freight, we might struggle to find anything analogous to the Silk Road. However, well-used routes still connect trading areas and these may be linked to specific kinds of industries or products. Raw materials, foodstuffs, computer parts, and so on, move around the world and across regions, and today's world also contains routes associated with services such as tourism, medical tourism, education, and the activities of NGOs. Modern mission organisations could learn from the COE by carrying outreach to identify opportunities, target investment, and recruit talented personnel. This would require specialised personnel and good interaction between front-line colleagues and mobilisation staff. It may also need some theological shifts and trust from supporting churches and parachurch groups.

Indigenous worldviews

Another strength of the COE was its willingness to engage with indigenous worldviews. Many in the church embraced forms of Christian mysticism, practices of contemplation, and experiences of spiritual solitude that feel a long way from contemporary evangelicalism.[43] This enabled them to attract and communicate with followers of religions rooted in personal experience and local philosophies. This is a little different from the church in the West, which was shaped by aspects of Greek and later Enlightenment thought related to rationalism and empiricism. Paradoxically perhaps, the COE also borrowed what they deemed useful from the thought of Aristotle, as well as Stoicism and Platonism.[44] In a dialogue with Muslims, one Egyptian monk of the Syriac Church proclaimed that concepts such as the Trinity or God dying on a cross defy reason and are beyond logic, recognising the limitations of rationalism in theology.[45]

Others emphasised the senses over the cerebral, celebrating God through sound, icons and images, and incense. Baumer points out that the COE also used pictures in some of their sacred and devotional books and produced platters and other objects decorated with themes from Scripture.[46] Formal liturgy and ritual also played an important role in helping the Syriac believers approach their God. Due to its history and geography, the COE preserved its semitic cultural heritage when its sister churches in western Europe moved away from it.[47] At the same time, the COE was both willing and able to "adapt the forms of their doctrine and devotion" to the cultures they came across.[48] However, the issue of language has remained contentious, some scholars praising the COE for its facility in various regional languages and cultures, but others claiming that its insistence on Syriac as a liturgical language impeded contextualisation in East Asia.[49]

Within a paper of this length, it is impossible to give the issue of indigenous thought the treatment it deserves. Despite centuries of Western influence, many parts of the so-called majority world still function according to what Western people might call non-rational thought. Generally speaking, Western thought, particularly as it manifests in evangelicalism, is strongly logical and analytical, although the rise of the charismatic movement speaks of a dissatisfaction with over-cerebral forms of Christianity. Comparisons of Western and Eastern thought—such labels may sound essentialist but do serve a purpose—by scholars such as Nisbett[50] suggest that cultures categorise differently. Theologian Jose de Mesa claims that Filipinos, Christian and non-Christian alike, have a world*feel* rather than world*view*,[51] which results in a contextual apprehension of world and faith. The Church of the East existed in the premodern period before the Renaissance or Reformation, understanding and presenting the faith in accordance with a variety of worldviews while never compromising the essentials of the faith. The Syriac Church had nothing analogous to the Aristotelian theological synthesis of Aquinas or the modernist-inspired theology of twentieth century evangelicalism. Related to this is the COE's interest in the tangible and the broader senses. Alistair McGrath is a faithful Protestant who wonders if the Christianity that emerged from the Reformation was rationalistic and arid.[52] With the record of the COE in mind, can we imagine slightly different ways of thinking and being Christian that draw on indigenous thought and might even feel Syriac, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox in practice if not theology? To be sure, this controversial agenda would not be for everyone, but the inherent philosophical and cultural nuancing might be useful in some contexts.

Residential presence

Arguably, the Syriac Church's supreme example of tangible or embodied Christianity was the monastery. These Christian settlements served as not only training institutes but also centres of spiritual presence and discipline, populated by monks. Some monks belonged to communities, while others preferred a life of individual contemplation and pietistic asceticism.[53] Baumer describes the strictness of the monastic life, centred on the study of the Scriptures, the aim of which was to regulate the monks' lives, avoid unseemly behaviour, and maintain standards of biblical and theological knowledge.[54] Many in the monasteries were gifted theologians and specialists in biblical studies,[55] and monastic life linked tightly academic scholarship, spiritual devotion, and the pastorate,[56] so-called *periodeuts* preaching in the countryside surrounding the monasteries where they lived.[57] Nicolini-Zani argues that monasteries were central to the work of the COE in China,[58] and Gillman and Klimkeit agree, but note that Central Asia saw a two-pronged approach in which the gospel was advanced by monasteries and the ministry of itinerant, lay Christians,[59] the latter to all intents and purposes self-supporting and independent. Monasteries along trade routes constituted links in a spiritual and educational chain of care connecting the Persian centre with COE groups as far away as Sri Lanka.[60] According to Hage, a main factor in the demise of the COE in East Asia was the breakdown in security following the dissolution of the Mongolian empire, separating remote monasteries and communities from the COE homeland and severing vital spiritual and episcopal connections.[61]

While the monasteries were home to spiritual figures of great wisdom—men and women[62]—they were also centres of broader learning and scholarship.[63] Apart from specifically Christian scholarship, the great monastery at Nisibis (in today's southeastern Turkey) was a repository of ancient wisdom such as the works of Aristotle. Monasteries also functioned as conduits for wisdom from Central Asia and India, preserving and translating ancient fables and folk stories.[64] Scholar-monks at Nisibis wrote treatises and pamphlets on cosmology and mathematics and engaged in dialogue with Islamic scholars.[65] The Syriac Church engaged with and benefited from various forms of knowledge, but always took Christian thought as central and normative.

It is unlikely that monasteries (or something like them) could be established in today's creative access nations. However, the concept might be viable for more open countries. In Asia, Buddhist temples and monasteries are often found at the centre of communities, functioning not only as places of worship, but also as social hubs, providers of education, and even places to meet. Churches do sometimes play a similar role, but there is perhaps not the same sense of openness



Church of Saint Jacob (*`Idto d-Mor Y`aqub*) in Nisibis. Photograph by Gareth Hughes, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

There are always risks with deep contextualisation, but there are also dangers in presenting a message composed of terms and thought forms that feel very foreign to our non-Christian friends. The lesson from the Church of the East is that we might be far braver and radical in our attempts to contextualise our presentation and explication of the Christian message and that this can be a central part of our mission practice.

and access for all. Mission organisations often have bases in open access contexts, but these tend to be dedicated to training, equipping, and facilitating ministry reaching out to non-believing locals. Following the example of the COE monasteries, it would be interesting to see Christian presences that function as centres of faith and providers of broader education and arenas for research in local culture, philosophy, and religions. I am reminded of the different flavours of "Monk Chat" in Chiang Mai, in which people can have informal conversations with English-speaking Buddhist monks on pretty much any topic or even attend short retreats at Buddhist monasteries.[66] Such a cross-disciplinary approach to faith, philosophy, and education may seem unusual to many in the evangelical world; some of us know how theological educators struggle to maintain church support when not carrying out evangelism or other front-line ministries. Yet, the mission practice of the Syriac Church contains a precedent for a free-wheeling, organic approach to engaging hearts and minds in the broadest sense.

Interreligious dialogue

The Syriac Church saw it as natural to maintain good relations with followers of other religions and understand their teachings and worldviews. Such sensitivity made the COE "a Christianity of mission and cultural mediation."[67] Initially, the main dialogue partners of the COE were the Manichaeans and the Zoroastrians,[68] and later they came across Tengrism, Islam, Buddhism, and even Hinduism. Such was the significance of Buddhism for the Church of the East[69] that Gillman and Klimkeit describe the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism in Central Asia as one of "constant interaction."[70] Yet, for all their willingness to engage positively with the other belief systems around them, they did not see their approach as anything akin to syncretism.



Nestorian epitaph dating from the Yuan dynasty unearthed at Chifeng, Inner Mongolia. There are lines of Uyghur Mongol writing; below the cross is a lotus. Photograph by Baomi, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Syriac Church's teaching that the body would be raised in a glorified state in the future[71] was a direct counter to the dualism of Buddhism and Manichaeism and their sense that the body was evil and to be abandoned. In Central Asia, COE missionaries built on their knowledge of Tengrism, viewing knowledge of the omnipotent sky-god as a *praeparatio evangelica*.[72] Morrow explains how Syriac missionaries in China used the concept of the *dao* (道) or *way* as a bridge from Chinese belief to Jesus Christ.[73] Scripture itself contains a precedent in the shape of Paul's appeal to the Greeks in Acts 17. Nicolini-Zani distinguishes between the contextualisation approaches of the Syriac missionaries and of Matteo Ricci centuries later. While the great Catholic missionary's main thrust was inter*cultural*, the COE successfully engaged in an inter*religious* endeavour.[74]

Contextualisation

In a paper dedicated to a general exploration and understanding of the mission practice of the Church of the East, it is not possible to look in depth at their efforts at contextualisation. Indeed, we might argue that the whole continuum of indigeneity, contextualisation, and local theologies is anachronistic and contains nuances that would be largely irrelevant to Syriac missionaries.

As they pushed into Central Asia, the COE considered translation of Christian texts very important, but rather than do this mechanically, they engaged with local cultural concepts and made extensive use of vernaculars; this is what Nicolini-Zani terms *transformation* rather than *translation*.[75] In Mongolia, the COE composed hymns in Mongolian and there was even one with alternating verses in Syriac and Mongolian.[76] In the Chinese context, the Xian stele, documents from Dunhuang,[77] and the pillar from Luoyang[78] all use Chinese and Buddhist terms to represent and explain Christian concepts. For some, such approaches to what we could call contextualisation today (using the word as an umbrella term) are controversial and have been seen as partially responsible for the eventual disappearance of the COE.[79] However, Wilmshurst urges caution about our attitude to the use of Buddhist or Chinese imagery and terms by Syriac Christians in China, claiming that the presence of lotus flowers next to crosses or the use of the word *Fo* for *God*—*Fo* 佛 is the Chinese word for *Buddha*, itself a transliteration from Sanskrit—is simply

an attempt to communicate a foreign idea in terms comprehensible to local believers.[80] He argues that the Chinese translation of *Holy Spirit* as *liang feng* (凉风 *cool wind*) has not evoked hostile reactions. On the other hand, the section title for Baumer's discussion of the dialogue between Syriac Christianity, Buddhism, and Daoism is "Between orthodoxy and syncretism."[81]

The Church of the East in China demonstrated a striking openness to local culture and religion and willingness to use local terms to express Christian concepts. We know that similar things are happening in evangelical missions, but it seems that the Syriac Church was more willing to take risks in borrowing terms from Buddhism and creating new terms. In addition, rather than a niche activity for specialists, it seems to have been part of mainstream practice. Studies of the Xian stele make fascinating reading; this heavily contextualised introduction to the gospel combines a strong commitment to the Christian faith with respect for and familiarity with the local culture and religion into which that faith was being planted. There are always risks with such deep contextualisation, but there are also dangers in presenting a message composed of terms and thought forms that feel very foreign to our non-Christian friends.

The lesson from the COE is that we might be far braver and radical in our attempts to contextualise our presentation and explication of the Christian message and that this can be a central part of our mission practice. In addition to this narrow translation/transformation approach, familiarity with local situations would also promote Christian responses to all manner of indigenous social, cultural, and political issues in the sense in which Shoki Coe originally used the term contextualisation.[82]

The quality and characteristics of the mission personnel

The mission of the Church of the East combined passion for the task, spirituality, and determination.[83] Stewart writes that for many in the Syriac Church, serving Christ and spreading his gospel were a natural response to what he had achieved for them on the cross. They were willing to endure and indeed be glorified in tribulation.[84] As the Syriac Christians moved eastwards from their original homeland, the persecutions they encountered refined the faith of many and propelled them further and further away from their homes towards Central Asia.[85]

While no one would suggest that modern missionary candidates undergo persecution as a prerequisite for service, for many in the COE, it was a powerful motivation. Today's missionaries might talk about hearing and fulfilling God's call and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. However, in an age of relative comfort and ease, it may be helpful for missionaries to be familiar with Christians, past and present, who have experienced and are shaped by persecution. There are many testimonies of missionaries and indigenous Christians who have suffered in their service for the Lord, yet few people read and are inspired by such accounts. Modern mission personnel could benefit from spending time with God's people who have been refined by the fire of persecution.

There are many testimonies of missionaries and indigenous Christians who have suffered in their service for the Lord, yet few people read and are inspired by such accounts. Modern mission personnel could benefit from spending time with God's people who have been refined by the fire of persecution.

The COE traced its origins to the group of dispersed Christians at Antioch in Acts 13 and Nicolini-Zani describes the inherent pluralism of the church since its inception.[86] Soon after the church began to move to the East, the Christians were forced to reconcile the Semitic and Hellenic elements within their own Christian belief and then deal with the Zoroastrianism that they met in Persia. Jenkins notes that in the seventh century, Merv was ruled by Muslims, but the city itself also contained Buddhists, Manichaeans, and Zoroastronians apart from Christians; the Church of the East was a minority group in a complex and diverse religious community.[87] In addition to this plurality of beliefs, the Syriac believers were able to negotiate the wide range of language and culture in a Central Asian region dominated by autonomous city states[88] that competed for political and trade advantages.

In spite of their affinity for different religions and cultures, or perhaps because of it, the Syriac church believed strongly that the believers needed to be counter-cultural. Stewart's quotation from Burkitt[89] describes how the COE believers avoided polygamy, promiscuity, and excessively harsh treatment of criminals such as thieves. Today's mission personnel often face similar challenges to their Christian witness caused by their own heritage as well as the context in which they serve. In a world of nation states and increasingly attitudes, including within the church, we need to be careful with our perception of our own nations and those we serve. Missionaries often minister in nations less affluent than their own and there can be issues over lifestyle, standards of living, and how much we identify with those we are trying to reach. Similar considerations apply to religions we consider untrue but which are followed by people around us. How do we treat those who work with us, in whatever capacity? These facets of life and ministry could affect how local people see us and the God we represent. We would do well to remember the sensitivity and humility shown by the Syriac missionaries

We would do well to remember the sensitivity and humility shown by the Syriac missionaries to those around them, which brought an openness to listen to the gospel.

We could learn from the Church of the East by sending trainee missionaries to ethnically and religiously diverse communities to understand other religions not from books alone, but also by interacting with their followers. In addition, rather than emphasising the implicit or explicit shortcomings of those religions, why not let those training for ministry learn about other religions in ways that would make sense to their followers?

to those around them, which brought an openness to listen to the gospel.[90]

A final theme is the "highest intellectual standards,"[91] which were needed as the Syriac Church negotiated language, culture, and faith in its move east. Engaging with other people's points of view while defending one's own would have required them to be intelligent and educated, as would working as administrators and business people. Syriac Christians were highly respected as scholars and medical doctors, for example, in Baghdad.[92] To be sure, mission is not only about intellect, yet the history of evangelicalism has been marked by anti-intellectualism,[93] which has been neither glorifying to God nor facilitative of ministry. Writing more than a hundred years ago, Allen emphasised the importance of education for Paul's mission work.[94] Today's world is at least as complex as that in which the Syriac Church carried out its mission endeavour. Evangelical missionaries need to interact with complex and diverse belief systems, often alongside their professional or tentmaking role. We may need wisdom to respond to the suspicion held toward missionaries from powerful far-off lands, whether the traditional North Atlantic mission powerhouses or the newer sending territories of Korea and Singapore.

Training and equipping

After reviewing what we might call "strategy" today and considering basic attributes of the COE missionaries, I turn to training. Although the Syriac Church had committed members who had grown up in multicultural and multifaith environments and were skilled in various professions, it nonetheless maintained a missionary training programme. Wherever it went, the Church of the East established monastic Bible training schools[95] not only to educate the children of their own community, but also to train young people, particularly those committed to mission.



Wall painting probably depicting Palm Sunday in Nestorian Temple at Qocho, 683–770 CE, 61 x 67 cm. Photograph by Gryffindor, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Because the COE grew slowly and moved slowly, Syriac Christians interacted with and even grew up together with followers of other religions. Because today's missionaries are often foreigners with a very different cultural and religious background from those they hope to reach, they may lack the ability or the openness to absorb and understand non-Christian faiths on their own terms. The example of the Syriac missionaries suggests that respecting and learning the faiths of those around us should occur early in the missionary experience. Courses in comparative religion can be marginal in intercultural studies programmes and may be taught by Christians. We could learn from the COE by sending trainee missionaries to ethnically and religiously diverse communities to understand other religions not from books alone, but also by interacting with their followers. In addition, rather than emphasising the implicit or explicit shortcomings of those religions, why not let those training for ministry learn about other religions in ways that would make sense to their followers? It is one thing to read about the basic tenets of Islam from a textbook written by well-meaning missionaries who have served in the Middle East, but quite another to be among followers of folk Islam who are heavily influenced by their own non-Arabic cultures. Finally, the body of Christ has moved south and east, and many followers of Christ grew up as followers of other religions. Although they may wish to turn their back on their previous faith and emphasise their new life in Christ, they could be a valuable resource for training and even mission itself. To be sure, there are Christian missionaries who are deeply knowledgeable about the faiths of those they are trying to reach, but my experience of mission training and practice and my understanding of the Syriac Church suggest that we could be much more



The ancient Rabban Hormizd Monastery, founded about 640 AD by the Assyrian Church of the East, is about 2 miles from Alqosh, Iraq. Photograph by Hardscarf, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

intentional about understanding the religions of those around us.

Stewart tells us that the main subject of the COE training schools was the Bible, but there were also medical training and lectures on business.[96] Some colleges offered courses in accountancy and teaching in music, the latter often to a very high standard.[97] Christians from Eastern Persia travelled to Merv, not only for theological education but also training in the "social sciences."[98]

By the time of Catholicos (Patriarch) Timotheos I (780–823), Syriac mission was carried out by a combination of "traders and merchants" and "professionally educated missionaries."[99] Timotheos required his missionaries to study the cultures of the people around them.[100] As well as being an outstanding church leader, the patriarch showed great diplomatic skill in dealing with various local and regional potentates.[101] For Nicolini-Zani, this respect for and knowledge of other cultures and worldviews allowed the COE believers to engage in constructive and evangelistic dialogue with members of the diverse communities around them. It also helped the church to establish its own religious and cultural identity within the pluralism in which it found itself.[102] Part of this was a desire for church members to be "exemplary members of society,"[103] in order to strengthen the faith and commitment of the church members as well as to commend the faith to the non-believers who lived among them. In addition to formal academic training, the monastic system also emphasised strong discipline and character formation.[104] The importance of the monasteries in training is seen in the great standing and authority of their abbots.[105] A powerful comment on the efficacy of the training of the COE comes from the Arab leader Caliph Sulayman, who is reported to have said that the Christian Persians reigned for a thousand years without needing the help of the Muslim Arabs, while the Arabs reigned for one hundred years and needed the Persians every hour.[106]

Many of our seminaries and mission training schools rightly emphasise theology and biblical studies, and we do have courses on comparative religion and missiology. Yet, the example of the Church of the East suggests that professional training, political and cultural awareness, and an ability to read the signs of the times on a local and global level are essential characteristics for missionaries. Mission curricula should include a much broader range of subjects than those traditionally included for ministry in a complex world and further needs to emphasise spiritual formation. Several scholars mention the inherent diversity of the COE and the places in which it grew and ministered. As well as knowing the religions of those around them, the COE missionaries would have understood how people thought, how they approached the world, and how they understood their place within it. There has been good work in contextualisation with regard to building bridges to content of and motifs from other cultures and worldviews, but we are less adept at looking at the Scriptures and doing theology through non-Western eyes and minds. Some of this understanding is more easily *caught* than *taught*. In many countries, urban areas manifest very high degrees of diversity, which could serve as a resource to help Christians learn about other religions and familiarise themselves with interreligious dialogue. We could make better use of the resources in the community around us and complement classroom instruction with real-life interaction with our religious and cultural others. To be sure, we live in a time when mission training colleges and seminaries are under pressure, particularly in the West, and when part-time and modular courses are increasingly popular. In an environment where Bible and theological knowledge is not as strong as before, it may be difficult to advance an agenda for a more complex and broader training, possibly including vocational skills. Even so, the COE has shown that a wide and integrated approach to mission training produced powerful results. We may deduce that some of the training provided by monastic centres would be considered *on-field* or *in-service*, in today's parlance. This may well be a way forward.

Certain trades and specialisms were seen as particularly valuable for the mission task in Central Asia and China and the church's concept of mission and the needs of the community were

… the example of the Church of the East suggests that professional training, political and cultural awareness, and an ability to read the signs of the times on a local and global level are essential characteristics for missionaries. Mission curricula should include a much broader range of subjects than those traditionally included for ministry in a complex world and further needs to emphasise spiritual formation.

reflected in the training offered. For modern evangelical missions, whether to open or creative access nations, vocational training in the pre-field equipping stage could have a powerful effect. I remember talking with a young couple from North America who, after arriving in a CAN and evaluating the situation, decided to specialise in tourism as a so-called platform for their life and ministry; they had seen an appropriate niche in the local economy. I wondered why this research was not done before they arrived and they had not worked in tourism in their own country, which would mean not only gaining experience but also establishing a track record in the industry. I once met some missionaries running a water purification and delivery business in another CAN, which proved to be an excellent way to live and work in the country and develop meaningful relationships with local people. I wondered why the same model was not used across the border in an open access nation where evangelical missionaries had been working for years. Could the same company exist on both sides of the border, increasing its credibility and providing economies of scale, while also training local Christians for *Business as Mission* and involving them in it? The experience of the Syriac Church suggests that close connections between field and training institutes and good knowledge of ministry opportunities could shape the necessary training. Members of the COE would be pleased if they saw young families committed to mission in CANs undertaking professional training and then appropriate apprenticeships alongside their theological equipping.

Thinking of training in a more strategic sense, Stewart affirms—in his study of the mission work of the Church of the East—the three-self principles of Venn and Anderson, arguing that the Christian communities established by mission should be self-supporting and self-governing, and, above all, self-propagating.[107] A great deal of the COE mission work was carried out by itinerant lay workers, but Stewart provides a list of Turkic Christians among whom were indigenous clergy[108] and Gillman and Klimkeit confirm that there were local clergy in the Mongolian context, while noting the relative absence of indigenous Chinese pastors in the COE.[109] According to Latourette, the Syriac communities in India were formed of indigenous people rather than the children of immigrants—either foreign Syriac Christians intermarried with local Indians or the locals were converted in significant numbers, possibly through the efforts of "Christian mercantile communities."[110] Much has been written about indigenous movements and shadow pastoring, as evangelical mission seeks to equip and empower locals for the ministry. The records of the Church of the East do not give us any particular insights into how local colleagues were identified and equipped, although it was an important element of their mission work. Many of the historic faith missions continue to mobilise foreign missionaries for front-line preaching and church planting, yet the example of the COE might suggest a subtle shift in emphasis from direct evangelism to the equipping of local colleagues. This identification of local workers may have implications for mission mobilisation and funding.

Conclusion

This very brief review of the mission endeavour of the Church of the East has examined aspects of their strategy, personnel, and training in an attempt to bring lessons for us in evangelical missions in a very different era and range of cultural contexts. It is, without apology, a case of a *running horse looking at flowers* (走马观花) and it was not possible to treat any particular area in depth. That said, I believe that there are various ideas and principles that may be of value to us today, any adopting of which must be accompanied by adapting.

The lessons from the Syriac Church may not be appropriate for every context and some of their ways of working may jar with the theological and missiological convictions of some readers. The article is offered *as is*, a comparative study whose conclusions may be food for thought and provoke further reflection. In his work on the Church of the East, Jenkins talks about "rediscovering the lost Christian worlds of Africa and Asia."[111] It is my hope and prayer that this brief article might inspire us to rediscover the lost Christian mission of Asia. **MRT**

---

[1] Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christianity. Volume 1: to AD 1500* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 322.
[2] Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 322.
[3] Rafis Abazov, *Culture and Customs of the Central Asian Republics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2007), 65.
[4] John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*: *The Story of a Church on Fire* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), xxxi.
[5] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, xxxi.
[6] Li Tang, *East Syriac Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011), xii.
[7] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, xxxiv.
[8] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 324.
[9] Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (London: Routledge, 1999), 81.
[10] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 131.
[11] Matteo Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East: Texts and History of the First Encounter of Christianity with China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 46.
[12] Kenneth Morrow, "Negotiating Belonging: The Church of the East's Contested Identity in Tang China" (PhD thesis, University of Texas at Dallas, 2019), vii.
[13] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 142.
[14] Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity* (London: IB Tauris, 2016), 5.
[15] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 4.
[16] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 10.
[17] Wolfgang Hage, *Syriac Christianity in the East* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1988), 38.
[18] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 5.
[19] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 167.
[20] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 5.
[21] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 76.
[22] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 77.
[23] Mark Worthing, "Nestorian Christian Contributions to Medicine in the Golden Age of Islam under the Abassid Caliphs of Baghdad 786–1258 CE," *Acta Medica Martiniana* 24, no. 3 (November 2024): 117.
[24] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 79.
[25] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 144.
[26] Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 64.
[27] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 176.
[28] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 17.
[29] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 146.
[30] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 160.
[31] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 138.
[32] Alphonse Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document* (Manchester: The University Press, 1925), 342.
[33] Mats Tunehag, Wayne McGee, Josie Plummer, eds., "Business as Mission," Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 59, produced for the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization hosted by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, 29 September to 5 October 2004, https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/business-mission-lop-59 (accessed 18 August 2025), 13.
[34] Robert Gallagher, "The Integration of Mission Theology and Practice: Zinzendorf and the Early Moravians," *Mission Studies* 25 (2008): 193.
[35] For a brief introduction to integral mission, see Micah Network, "Micah Network Declaration on Integral Mission," Micah Global, 27 September 2001, https://micahglobal.org/storage/2944394 (accessed 18 August 2025).
[36] Christopher Smith, "The Legacy of William Carey," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no. 1 (January 1992): 4.
[37] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 49.
[38] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 50.
[39] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 149.
[40] Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.
[41] Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 323.
[42] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (London: Robert Scott, 1912), 23.
[43] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 74.

[44] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 27.
[45] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 76.
[46] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 166.
[47] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 83.
[48] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 91.
[49] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 80 and 106.
[50] Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003).
[51] José de Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far from Home* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2003), 85.
[52] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 97.
[53] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 73.
[54] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 129.
[55] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 87.
[56] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 148.
[57] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 231.
[58] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 97.
[59] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 222.
[60] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 150.
[61] Hage, *Syriac Christianity in the East*, 26.
[62] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 73.
[63] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 77.
[64] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 79.
[65] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 77.
[66] Amazing Thailand, "Experiences: Monk Chats," https://thailandinsider.com/experience/monk-chats/ (accessed 18 August 2025) and Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, "Welcome to Monk Chat," https://www.monkchat.net/web2020/index.php (accessed 18 August 2025).
[67] Camplani, quoted in Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, xiv.
[68] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 105.
[69] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 92.
[70] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 206.
[71] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 178.
[72] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 196.
[73] Morrow, "Negotiating Belonging," 56.
[74] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 179.
[75] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 182.
[76] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 57.
[77] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 271; Max Deeg, "The Rhetoric of Antiquity: Politico-Religious Propaganda in the Nestorian Stele of Chang'an," *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 1 (2007): 20.
[78] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 140.
[79] A nuanced picture of the decline of the COE in Central Asia can be found in Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 234.
[80] David Wilmshurst, "Beth Sina Ye: A Typical East Syrian Ecclesiastical Province?" in *Winds of Jingjiao: Studies on Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, ed. Li Tang and Dietmar W. Winkler (Vienna: Lit, 2016), 163.
[81] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 187.
[82] Shoki Coe, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education," *Theological Education* 9, no. 4 (1973): 233–43.
[83] Wilmshurst, "Beth Sina Ye," xix.
[84] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 78.
[85] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 16.
[86] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 5.
[87] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 46.
[88] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 46.
[89] Burkitt, quoted in Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 115, 184.
[90] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 80.
[91] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 46.
[92] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 202.
[93] George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26.
[94] Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 21.
[95] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 36.
[96] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 39.
[97] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 41.
[98] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 48.
[99] Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 61.
[100] Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 62.
[101] Baumer, *The Church of the East*, 153.
[102] Nicolini-Zani, *The Luminous Way to the East*, 49.
[103] Andrew Platt, "Changing Mission at Home and Abroad: Catholicos Timothy I and the Church of the East in the Early Abbasid Period," in *Winds of Jingjiao* (see footnote 80), 167.
[104] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 44.
[105] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 122.
[106] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 130.
[107] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 165.
[108] Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 206.
[109] Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 239.
[110] Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 324.
[111] Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, 4.



立于磐石——庚子教难前后的晋南教会
Building upon This Rock—The Church in Southern Shanxi Province before and after the Boxer Rebellion

亦文*(编著). 香港: 恩道出版社, 2025.*
Yi Wen (ed.). Hong Kong: Inspirata, 2025.
ISBN 978-988-8885-74-9 (Simplified version, print), 978-988-8885-78-7 (ebook, Simplified Chinese), 978-988-8885-82-4 (ebook, Traditional Chinese).

Building upon This Rock examines historical material between 1899 and 1905 taken from *China's Millions*, a monthly magazine published by the China Inland Mission (CIM). As a compilation of archival documents, the book provides narrative depth with a helpful lens for understanding and interpreting church history. Its rich accounts drawn from articles from China's Millions are supplemented by annotations and contextual background as well as reflections that relate to today's context.

The first section of the book presents ministry reports of CIM-affiliated churches in southern Shanxi around 1899. The churches had, by that time, achieved a significant degree of autonomy, engaging in evangelistic work in various forms and had begun to influence social customs. Church workers met regularly to discuss matters of church governance, such as eligibility for baptism, appointment of co-workers, and whether individuals addicted to opium could join the church.

The accounts of the churches in southern Shanxi prior to the Boxer Rebellion and the extremely difficult process of rebuilding after the persecution provide valuable insights that are relevant to the global church today. Considering the Boxer crisis from the standpoint of church governance rather than martyrdom, the book looks at how the churches responded to the severe losses they suffered—both in leadership and congregation—and to multiple complex issues they faced, such as compensation negotiations and handling of indemnity payments. Readers will find this discussion particularly moving.

By 1905, the CIM-affiliated churches in the southern part of Shanxi Province had nearly returned to their state before the persecution, bringing to mind the words of Jesus: "I will build my church on this rock, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." This book is a valuable Chinese-language resource for church leaders, mission workers, missionary mobilizers, mission agencies, and those involved in missionary training.

Chinese language audio recordings (in 3 parts) of the interview with Yi Wen about *Building upon This Rock* during the online book launch are available at: https://ezra.timotai.org/archives/video/20250621/, https://ezra.timotai.org/archives/video/20250628/ and https://ezra.timotai.org/archives/video/20250705.

Thoughts on Contextualization

Lewis White



The Whites' journey began during a summer experience to South Asia, leading them to a shared commitment to missions. This commitment allowed them to learn different languages and live in a number of countries where they sought to live among the people God called them to serve. Their vision is centered on seeing God's kingdom and community grow and multiply.

Contextualization is a fascinating subject still open to discovering many new and exciting insights. In this paper, I set out some insights and simple principles that I have found helpful throughout our ministry. May we all renew our commitment to this important task of contextualizing ourselves and our *message* for the sake of God's kingdom.

When Jesus commanded his disciples to go and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing and teaching them his commands, it would certainly be enlightening to know how they responded to his commission. Did they realize the implications of this command? Did they know that they would need to go to distant lands, meet strange peoples, and learn to speak their languages? Were they aware of the importance of contextualizing the *message and its potential* implications for their lives and ours?

My wife and I have now served in many different countries and among several different unique ethnic groups over the past thirty-five years. Throughout these years, we've tried to embody the core values of the founder of the China Inland Mission and other colleagues who have practiced contextualized living. Would it have been possible for those who went before us to have done anything without the Holy Spirit? We too need him today. And while we try to contextualize ourselves (which is never 100%) and the *message*, the Holy Spirit is the One who incarnates the *message* in the lives of people. He is the only One who transforms men and women in their context. Contextualization is a partnership between God and man; and because language and culture evolve over time, the Holy Spirit will need to continually fill us with insight and courage to clothe the *message* in ways that those around us will see it as their own. One key problem we face is our resistance to change, and unless we change and adapt, we will become cross-cultural dinosaurs that are irrelevant in these rapidly changing times and among the people we serve.

Hudson Taylor was a controversial figure who was greatly influenced by innovative workers like Karl Gützlaff and William Chalmers Burns and wore Chinese clothing during his first term of service from 1854 to 1959. The lessons he learned from these older and more experienced workers helped him develop his concept of contextualization. Even so, it was one personal experience that made a significant impact on his decision to adopt Chinese clothing and appearance and become like a Chinese for the Chinese.

Sometime during his first term of service, Taylor was sharing the *message* in coastal cities like Shanghai and Ningbo. At the time, he wore a formal coat, called a frock coat. This popular attire for British men had a fitted waist and full skirt. It was worn for formal occasions and also served as a versatile business suit. This Western style of clothing was foreign and strange to the Chinese. One feature of this attire included buttons that were absent from Chinese clothing of that era. On one occasion, while Hudson Taylor was preaching to a crowd and wearing his frock coat, he noticed a Chinese man who was particularly attentive. Encouraged by this apparent interest, Taylor poured his heart into his sermon. After finishing, Taylor approached the man, expecting a question about the *message* or about Christianity.

To his surprise, the man's curiosity had nothing to do with the *message*. Instead, this man was fascinated by the buttons on Taylor's coat and asked all kinds of detailed questions about them: how they were made, why they were arranged in that way, and what material they were made of. The man even reached out to touch and examine the buttons, marveling at their novelty. For him, the buttons were a far more immediate and intriguing subject than the foreign religion Taylor was

preaching. This encounter left Taylor both amused and sobered. He realized his Western appearance distracted his listeners from hearing the *message*.

Nevertheless, while Taylor's clothing might have been a distraction, it was also a means to attract people; and it gave him an opportunity to meet and share with people. Even a novelty can lead to significant interactions with others. This is merely a suggestion for contemplation. However, Taylor understood this to be a distraction, so he decided to wear Chinese clothes. He also wore his hair in the Chinese style known as the Manchu queue. Consequently, when Taylor resolved to make this unconventional strategy a policy for the CIM, he faced significant criticism from fellow missionaries and supporters. There were people at home and Westerners in China who thought this strategy was inappropriate for proper mission work. This policy caused other missionaries and Westerners to refer to the CIM as the "Pigtail Mission." This nickname was a recognition of the mission as well as a derisive term used by Westerners of that time.

We aim to stay connected to cultural and linguistic shifts in our times, both locally and internationally, by understanding and implementing the principles of contextualization outlined in the following pages. By adopting this approach in the present, we ensure our relevance in the long run. We need to practice the following principles and pass on the value of incarnational service to the next generation of workers to ensure that the *message* continues to be relevant in these fast-changing times and in future generations. The *message* is above culture; and truth is true for all cultures and for all times, even in a changing world.

Language, cultures, and times are in constant flux. The times and cultures faced by Hudson Taylor were vastly different from those we face today. We live in a time of accelerated technological change. The advancements in technology over the past 100 years have exponentially sped up the movement towards global integration and homogenization. And at the same time, this has separated us into countless different affinity groups. The advent of air travel has made the movement of people around the world easy and relatively inexpensive. Whether it's for tourism, travel, business, or immigration,



Hudson Taylor, in a frock coat, speaking to a Chinese man, illustrated by Rosemary Clarke, 1975.

the crossing of national boundaries has never been easier. People of all kinds can now intermingle and connect with others. The internet and social media allow for immediate access to untold amounts of information, entertainment of every kind, and content in any culture and language. The internet offers information about different cultures, from amateurish videos to professional online streaming sites. We can find anything we can imagine, from culturally specific ideas, products, and entertainment. The worldwide distribution of Hollywood movies and television shows has significantly shaped the global appetite for Western entertainment. This medium has exerted profound influence on the perceptions of nations, affecting cultural norms and introducing billions to Western values, lifestyles, and storytelling styles. This influence of the American film industry has had a substantial impact on global popular culture for good and bad, and for admiration and criticism.

Another significant global influence is the phenomenon of global pop culture that encompasses music, fashion, and celebrity culture. These elements transcend international boundaries, creating a façade of a shared global culture. The interconnection of international economies is another driving influence that connects diverse parts of the world. The interchange of products, cultural symbols, ideas, and innovations are innumerable. For global brands to successfully market their products for different cultures, they need to contextualize their products. They spend a lot of money so that they can understand a culture's consumer base, behavior, language, cultural themes, and tastes. So are we just marketing a product or is there a significant difference in contextualizing our message? This marketing effort has changed consumption habits, values, and behaviors through the promotion of a wide variety of products. Analogous to unorthodox religious views and cults sprouting from orthodox beliefs, people copy famous brands for profit, power, or influence. We can observe these changes and the effects they have on a global scale, learn from them, and use them for our advantage. However, the observable layer of cultural expression is only the tip of the proverbial cultural iceberg. The unobservable factors below the surface are the belief

We need to practice the following principles and pass on the value of incarnational service to the next generation of workers to ensure that the *message* continues to be relevant in these fast-changing times and in future generations. The *message* is above culture; and truth is true for all cultures and for all times, even in a changing world.

systems, familial and cultural norms, values, communication styles, life experiences, communal consciousness, and political systems that still need to be discovered and understood.

This unseen world of thought and understanding, language and mind maps is where the real work begins. The good news is that despite the diverseness and complexity of all this, everyone has a soul, mind, and body. These parts of humanity define us all. We have been created in the image of God with physical bodies and psychological traits. We all have the same spiritual, emotional, and physical needs. No one is exempt from these needs. Using an image from today's technology, we all have been hardwired with the same hardware, though we run with different operating systems. These cultural operating systems include unique thought processes, communication styles, emotional expressions, beliefs, and personality traits. A people's physical environment is a contributing factor in shaping their beliefs, values, behaviors, and interactions within the group and with those outside the group. None of us can escape these forces that shape and define us.

Jesus also underwent this shaping in his incarnation.

Jesus, the word of God, became incarnate in human form. He grew up in the context of first-century Palestine. He lived and learned how to be a Jew. He was Jewish through and through. He learned the appropriate ways to express his emotions, connect with others, and navigate between the societal structures of his time. His life experiences and knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures shaped his *message* and the way he communicated his *message* to the people. Jesus knew his culture. What we don't know is how familiar he was with Greek and Roman cultures. He clearly had knowledge of and experience with other cultures, as he lived and communicated his *message* and mission to the people of his time.

In contrast, his disciples struggled to connect with people who weren't Jewish. From their youth, they were taught and caught the Jewish worldview. There was a deep and wide gulf of separation between Jews and Gentiles. Jewish dietary laws, customs, religious laws, and moral rules built these walls of separation and affected their effectiveness in becoming cross-cultural communicators. We similarly struggle to disrobe our own cultural clothing, which prevents us from really getting to know the understandings, feelings, religious beliefs, joy of practices, and deeply held values of other cultures. We can answer the simple questions of "What?" and "Why?," but still fall short of entering into another people's world. We enter as outside observers and participants in a culture. We observe the culture through the lens of our own culture and, as participants, we experience life among them, feeling their highs and lows, and building deep friendships of trust. Gaining credibility, we discover, is as satisfying as it is threatening. We want to come to the point in our ministry where we no longer think in terms of us and them, but are accepted as a contributing member of their group.

We can answer the simple questions of "What?" and "Why?," but still fall short of entering into another people's world. We enter as outside observers and participants in a culture. We observe the culture through the lens of our own culture and, as participants, we experience life among them, feeling their highs and lows, and building deep friendships of trust. … We want to come to the point in our ministry where we no longer think in terms of us and them, but are accepted as a contributing member of their group.

Assimilation and syncretism

As we contextualize ourselves and the *message*, we need to know that there are dangers to understand and avoid. Assimilation and syncretism are two concepts that involve the blending or merging of different cultures. These two ideas differ only in their approaches and outcomes. Assimilation is the process through which individuals or groups adopt the customs, language, practices, values, and norms of another cultural group. By this method, the dominant civilization often swallows the smaller or less developed people. This process can involve one civilization imposing their culture on another or it might be that a people are willing to adopt the more progressive culture, whether out of necessity or convenience. And so, in assimilation, a culture adopts the dominant culture's values, beliefs, and practices as their own. The result is a more homogenized society where cultural differences are diminished or erased.

Syncretism, on the other hand, involves the merging or blending of different cultural traditions, beliefs, or practices to create a completely new and unique cultural identity that incorporates elements from two or a multitude of cultures. In syncretism, diverse beliefs and practices coexist. Coexistence has not always been possible between the syncretized culture and the original one. Remember the clash between the Samaritans and the Jews, or the Druze and the majority community in the Levant, Sufis and Sunnis, or offshoots from orthodox Christian beliefs. While in assimilation one people melt into the cultural ocean of another group and disappear, in syncretism we find a unique blending of different religious elements to create a new and unique religious expression.

In the delicate balance between assimilation and syncretism, it is crucial to remain vigilant against the infiltration of unorthodox beliefs into the church. Stories have been told in which the *message* was lost over time or became something new and different. The Nestorians are one example in which the *message* became assimilated and was lost. While there are many political and social reasons for the demise of the Nestorian mission work in China, one significant reason their work did not remain was that they contextualized Christian doctrines into Buddhist concepts so much that the uniqueness

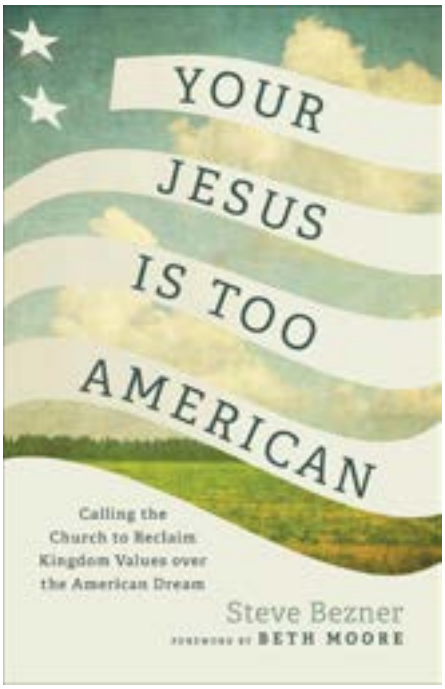
of their *message* was lost through assimilation and they became a footnote in history. The over-contextualization of the message proved to be a fatal mistake made by the Nestorians.

Examples of syncretism are similarly many. Catholicism in places like the Philippines and Southeast Asia have become heavily syncretistic. *Santo Niño de Cebu*—the devotion to the Santo Niño (Holy Child) in Cebu—is a blend of Catholicism with pre-colonial animistic beliefs in which the image of the *Santo Niño* is revered as a symbol of both Christianity and indigenous spirituality. *Cao Dai* is Vietnamese religion that mixes Buddhist, Christianity, and Vietnamese folk religion. Followers of *Cao Dai* pray to Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, and even to Sun Yat-sen and the French writer-poet Victor Hugo.

Syncretism, as an anthropological concept, involves the convergence of diverse religious, cultural, social, economic, political, and technological facets of life, facilitating interaction among them. We shouldn't think that any of us are really totally free from our own old beliefs and superstitions. Whether or not we believe old sayings like "Step on a crack, break your mother's back"—a superstition related to avoiding stepping on sidewalk cracks—or "Throw salt over your shoulder"—which was thought to ward off evil spirits—they are part of every culture and remain lodged in our cultural psyche, having been passed down through the generations. So, the phenomena of assimilation and syncretism have occurred throughout history between civilizations, cultures, and religions. This has led to the exchange of ideas, the formation of new traditions, and the creation of rich and diverse cultural landscapes that continue to shape societies around the world. For this reason, God calls his people to be different and distinct from the world around them.

God commands Israel and the church not to be assimilated or adopt the beliefs and ways of those who don't know him. We are in the world but are to be different from the world. In the Old Testament, the Lord God strictly commanded the Jews to live different and distinct lives from the peoples around them. Israel constantly failed to live up to God's commandments for them. And it was not until after the Exile that they broke free from these tendencies. But even then, they added commands and regulations to the Law, moving Jesus to reprimand the Pharisees for doing so. With the advent of the Messiah and the birth of the church, the New Testament continued to emphasize this imperative, instructing believers to maintain a distinct identity in the world. Jesus prayed, in John 17:16, that his followers would be sanctified and protected from the evil one, and that they are not of the world just as he is not of this world. Jesus prayed that we would not be controlled by the values and principles of this world. Paul, in Romans 12:1–12, likewise urged the church to *not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of their minds*. Thank God that Jesus prayed for us and that we are aware that we should live outside the influences of this world's cultural values, desires, practices, and behaviors. This is, however, something that is more easily said than done, because we all have cultural blind spots and have difficulty in distinguishing between what is cultural and what is biblical.

Our perception of the world is inevitably shaped by our cultural background. We are naturally unaware of the cultural influences that have shaped our own



cultural identities, preferences, and behaviors. We all interpret the Scriptures through the lens of our own worldviews, and when we try to apply the examples and principles from the Scriptures, we do it from our own particular worldview. In his book, *Your Jesus Is Too American*, Steve Bezner challenges Americans to reconsider their cultural assumptions and preconceptions about Jesus and Christianity.[1] Bezner asks Americans to reflect on how our perceptions of Jesus may be influenced by societal norms. He then challenges his readers to embrace a more profound and genuine encounter with the teachings and life of Jesus. To effectively contextualize the message, a comprehensive understanding of the Scriptures and our cultural perspective is paramount. Regardless of our background or origin, we all view the world through our cultural lens, a factor that has posed challenges for missionaries throughout history up to the present day. We must learn to be observers of our own culture and

To effectively contextualize the message, a comprehensive understanding of the Scriptures and our cultural perspective is paramount. Regardless of our background or origin, we all view the world through our cultural lens, a factor that has posed challenges for missionaries throughout history up to the present day. We must learn to be observers of our own culture and understand the histories and cultures of the Scriptures. Otherwise, we will have trouble becoming skilled contextualists.

understand the histories and cultures of the Scriptures. Otherwise, we will have trouble becoming skilled contextualists.

Bible translators have consistently grappled with this challenge. They know languages cannot be divorced from culture. In his article, "Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity," Alan R. Tippett wrote:

> As we look at the Scriptures within their Hebrew and Greek garments, just what is supracultural, and what is cultural? The history of the translation of the English Bible is a story of the struggle for cultural relevance in communication, a struggle for meaning, not only across cultures (Hebrew and Greek to English) but across generations of semantic change (Elizabethan, Victorian and Modern Man). Likewise, in every mission field over the last century, Scripture translation reminds us that the gospel, which is *above* culture, nevertheless has to be presented in a meaningful cultural form.[2]

A useful and simple rule of thumb in evaluating a custom, belief, or behavior is to decide whether it is biblical, unbiblical, or neutral. The question is what is biblical and then determine what in the culture can be redeemed or what must be changed. *Contextualization* is thus the means to communicate the Truth in a way that people can relate to and understand it.

A handy tool for assessing contextualization is using a charted scale. This allows us to determine the level of enculturation we desire and the potential risks involved. The C-Scale, commonly referred to as the "C1 to C6 Spectrum," was devised by John Travis (a pseudonym) as a method to quantify the extent to which churches are influenced by their environment.[3] The C-Scale ranges from C1 to C6, with C1 representing the least contextualization and C6 indicating the highest level.

- C1: Christians in churches radically different from their own culture, where worship is done in a language other than their own mother tongue.
- C2: The same as C1, but worship is done in the believer's mother tongue.
- C3: Christians in culturally indigenous Christian churches that avoid cultural forms from their religious past.
- C4: Christians in culturally indigenous congregations that retain biblically permissible past religious forms in prayer, music, dance, and traditional festivals, infusing these forms with biblical meaning. These indigenous Christians may call themselves something other than Christians. For example, they may call themselves something like "followers of Jesus," but do not see themselves as part of their previous religious belief system.
- C5: Messianic followers of Jesus as Lord and Savior in fellowships of like-minded believers, who continue to identify themselves culturally as followers of that community's religion.
- C6: Secret or underground believers, due to fear, isolation, or threat of extreme retaliation.

We have seen or heard of Christians practicing their faith all along the C1 to C6 spectrum. There has been the hope to change C1–C2 churches so that they become more indigenous, and controversy concerning those who are practicing C5 followers of Jesus Christ. Most of us want to see indigenous believers practicing the *message* in culturally appropriate ways. This, however, is not always possible or even desirable given that certain cultural expressions of the church have been around for decades, centuries, and even millennia. In other places, the open expression of Christianity would mean severe persecution or potentially death. Some have contextualized the *message* into practicing C5 communities. When we grapple with C5 Christians, we can debate all the problems in the implementation and continuance of these communities as well as the controversy these communities have generated between mission agencies and the church in the West. We know from history that unless a community is seen as unique and separate, there is a greater likelihood of assimilation over time or syncretism in time. In the end, we don't want to over-contextualize our *message* or under-contextualize it.

In the Scriptures and church history, there are examples of both indigenous preachers who have contextualized the *message* in a unique and innovated way. Peter contextualized his *message* to his audiences. Peter was thoroughly Jewish in his upbringing. His values, beliefs, and identity were Jewish. Peter skillfully contextualized the message to the crowd of 3,000 at Pentecost. The *message* was contextualized so that all who heard it understood it from a Jewish cultural background. However, as a Jew, he had internal struggles in his interactions with Gentiles. Even Paul upbraided him in Galatian 2:11–15 when he feared the party of the circumcision rather than staying true to the truth of the *message*. Likewise, we too can find ourselves in similar situations in which we struggle with really going indigenous while we live and serve in another culture.

In contrast, Paul—like a third-culture kid—was different from Jesus and his disciples who walked with him before his ascension. Even though Paul was Jewish, he was raised in a Greek culture. He knew there were big differences between Jews and Gentiles. He also understood that the *message* was not linked to any one culture. Like Tippett, he understood the *message* was *above any one culture*. It is possible that Paul may not have had a word for the concept of "supra-cultural" without explicit explanation. For instance, it is highly improbable that he would have employed the term "Trinity," but once it was introduced to him like "supra-cultural", I anticipate that he would have readily accepted these conceptual words. Paul understood the Greek culture, language, cultural heritage, and worldview. He could thus differentiate between a Jewish context and a Greek context. In the Acts of the Apostles chapter 17, Paul explained the Christian message to a Greek audience at the Areopagus in Athens. He understood that to reach the Greeks, he needed to relate in a language and with concepts they understood. Paul had the wisdom to

We know from history that unless a community is seen as unique and separate, there is a greater likelihood of assimilation over time or syncretism in time. In the end, we don't want to over-contextualize our *message* or under-contextualize it.

share the *message* in a Greek way. He was willing to change himself so that everyone would be able to relate, understand, and respond to the *message* (See 1 Cor 9:19–22). These two examples from Acts show us that Peter and Paul made the *message* relevant to their audiences whether they were from the same culture or from a different culture; whether they were from one social class or another.

From the times of the Apostles to this present day, contextualization has been an important concept, even before a special word was invented to describe this process. Saint Patrick is an example of someone who could do this. Born in Roman Britain in the late fourth century, Patrick was captured by Irish raiders at the age of sixteen. After six years of captivity, he turned to the faith and escaped from Ireland. Following a vision, he returned to Ireland as a missionary and spent many years traveling across the country, converting people to Christianity, established monasteries, and spread the *message*. He was so successful that in succeeding centuries, the Christians from Ireland reintroduced the *message* to England and the European continent. Saint Patrick was apt in applying a concept we call "*form vs. meaning*" to share the gospel with the pagans of Ireland.



The Baptism of the King of Cashel by Saint Patrick by James Barry. Oil on paper, 62 x 63 cm. From National Gallery of Ireland, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.1975.

Saint Patrick used the sacred pagan Shamrock to illustrate the Holy Trinity, effectively changing its meaning to teach about God's nature. By associating the sun symbol with Jesus Christ, he conveyed the gospel message to the pagan Celts, making Christianity more relatable and appealing. By repurposing old symbols with new meanings, St. Patrick integrated pagan traditions into his Christian teachings, converting the Irish population. This innovative approach allowed him to convey Christian truths in a manner that aligned with Celtic beliefs while fostering deeper understanding and acceptance of Christianity.
The adaptability of concepts and interpretations was crucial in introducing the Christian message into the new context. This emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between form and meaning in contextualizing truth.

So what does this idea of form vs. meaning really mean?

From the times of the Apostles to this present day, contextualization has been an important concept, even before a special word was invented to describe this process.

Form vs. meaning is all about the difference between what a thing or idea represents and what that thing or idea means. Form can be anything, including an object, idea, or behavior. The meaning is the idea, information, and emotion that the form represents, but remains hidden within the form. Forms and the meaning behind the forms also perform a particular function in a culture. This means that a form serves a particular purpose in a culture and so we need to consider the effect of introducing a new form or changing an old and familiar form without understanding the function that a particular form serves.

Prayer beads are used in three major religions that I know of as an aid to prayer. While the beads used are similar in *form* and have a similar *function*; the *meanings* the religions give to the items are different. Here is an example where the *form* is different, but where the *meaning* and *function* are the same. How do different cultures celebrate the Lord's Supper? In some places, people taking communion don't drink alcohol while others do. Some believers in tropical climates use coconut water while other churches in the northern hemisphere might use some other type of liquid. Some places use wafers while others use leaven bread and others use crackers or even sago—a starch extracted from the pith of a tropical palm stem. So, while the *form* is different, the *function* and *meaning* are the same. So, *form* is the outside appearance, while the *meaning* is the deeper understanding or significance represented by the *form*. Understanding this relationship is crucial in communicating our message from one culture to another.

Now before we can begin to replace a *form*, we must understand our own cultural preferences and prejudices and have a deep understanding of the culture of the people we are called to serve. The *etic* and *emic* concepts of perspectives show us the way. In the 1950s, anthropologist and linguist Kenneth Pike coined the terms *etic* and *emic*.[4] Pike's terms refer simply to an outsider and insider's perspective. Let me explain these two terms and why they are important.

The *etic* view is an outsider's perspective of a culture. This view is thought of as observing a culture with a new set of eyes. As outsiders, we compare and contrast a culture in the light of our own cultural prejudices as well as our understanding of biblical culture and truth. Looking at a culture from the outside, we can present a unique perspective of that culture.

Imagine a person who has lived in a bustling city for many years. They have

grown accustomed to the noise of traffic, the smells of street vendors, and the sights of crowded sidewalks. To them, these things are just part of their daily life. However, if a visitor from a quiet, rural area were to visit the city, they would quickly notice and point out the honking cars, the aroma of the street food, and the crowded streets that the city dweller may no longer consciously notice due to their familiarity with the environment. This illustration shows how we can filter out familiar stimuli in our own surroundings and become desensitized to them, while newcomers or outsiders may readily perceive and draw attention to these details.

From the *etic* perspective, we can easily spot areas of life that are different from our own. We can also identify areas in a culture that clash or are diametrically opposed to the *message*. In other words, we can understand the similarities and differences between cultures and biblical norms. This perspective can give us ideas on what needs to be contextualized and how to contextualize our *message* in a way that is accepted, understood, and meaningful to our host's culture.

Even when we can create a list of cultural similarities and differences, our work in understanding a host culture is only partly complete. One way to illustrate this is describe the difference between trees. Our forests and landscapes are a colorful mix of trees, from the deciduous trees that shed their leaves in the fall to the evergreen trees that stay green all year round. There are also coniferous trees with their cones, and many other types of trees that make our natural world beautiful. Trees can be identified based on variety—species and cultivars. Species are trees belonging to the same taxon and exhibit similar characteristics. Cultivars are a variety of trees identified with specific traits like disease resistance, fruit production, or ornamental features. We can also describe trees according to their growth habits, changes depending on environmental variables, and differing leaf characteristics that are observable even within the same variety and kind. We can therefore observe trees (*etic view*) and make many great observations. However, the observable view is only half of the tree. There is another unobservable part of the tree—the part that grows in the ground. If we were able to examine the root system of the tree with x-ray vision, we would see a very different and essential part of the tree.

> … when we are learning another culture, it's critically important to understand their original meanings, the little details and cultural significances accepted within the culture. We must keep in mind that there is really no direct one-to-one equivalence between cultures or languages. A thing is a thing, but the connotations and understanding of one thing can be very different for someone living in one place than it is for someone living in another place.

Likewise, there are parts of a culture that are observable and others that are not. These include beliefs, values, histories—both collective and personal—and the stories told among them. We thus need to know and understand culture from the inside out. Pike terms this the *emic view*.

The *emic view* is seeing, feeling, understanding the world like a local. It is crucial for us to recognize that individuals across the globe, irrespective of their ethnic background, exhibit shared human characteristics. These include common psychological and physical needs. Everyone lives within a society in which they share their thoughts and emotions with others. All peoples have the same spiritual condition and have a need for redemption even though they might not recognize or see their spiritual need as relevant. Each ethnic group expresses these spiritual needs, hopes, and ideas in unique and creative ways. A people's *worldview* includes their religious beliefs, group values, life experiences, educational knowledge, social and political views, philosophical perspectives, and reactions to world events. These all affect a group's understanding of the world. Trying to understand it all presents us with a daunting list to work through, because we will need to have a high level of competency in the language as well as spend a significant amount of time interacting with people in our target culture.

While books and other resources can help us with this task, we also must do our own research. We need to remember that cultures change and what was true for a culture at one point in time will not always remain true. This complexity presents us with a challenge when it comes to contextualizing our *message*.

So what are we to do? We must become incarnational ministers of the *message*. And as we become adept at participant-observation—seeing a culture from *etic* and *emic* views—we will soon discover that meanings within given cultures are not one-to-one or perfect matches.[5]

Different cultures have their own unique ways of saying and doing things. We call this *cultural equivalence*. So, when we are



learning another culture, it's critically important to understand their original meanings, the little details and cultural significances accepted within the culture. We must keep in mind that there is really no direct one-to-one equivalence between cultures or languages. A thing is a thing, but the connotations and understanding of one thing can be very different for someone living in one place than it is for someone living in another place. Connotations are a collection of associations or emotional responses that a word elicits beyond its literal or primary meaning. These associations can be positive, negative, or neutral. They can be influenced by individual experiences, cultural backgrounds, and contextual factors.

For example, the Star of David is a six-pointed star associated with Judaism. It is a prominent symbol on the flag of Israel and is considered a symbol of Jewish identity and heritage. However, the six-pointed star is also a symbol of the Hindu deity Kumari and represents the union of male and female energies. Additionally, this symbol is utilized in schools across India and Nepal. Different cultures will assign diverse meanings and interpretations to this same symbol.

Connotations significantly impact our interpretation and comprehension of language, providing additional layers of meaning. Different meanings and connotations are identifiable even from one generation to another. So, from looking at culture with *emic* and *etic* perspectives and knowing about *cultural equivalence*, the best we can do at times is to find an approximate value, thus minimizing misunderstandings and promoting mutual understanding and respect between cultures. By aiming for cultural equivalence in communication, translators, interpreters, and communicators can bridge the gap between different cultural meanings and make sure that the *message* is interpreted and understood as accurately as possible. This means getting to know as many cultural nuances from our own culture and target culture as is possible, and to convey the essence of the original message in a way that is culturally appropriate. By combining both the *emic* and *etic* perspectives, we can have a better grasp of our host culture, and, in so doing, can balance our understanding of an insider's view with our understanding as an outsider, *in order to communicate the message more effectively*. Awareness from both perspectives will clarify misconceptions about our *message* and address the cultural barriers we face. In the end, the *emic* and *etic* views are a tool to help us contextualize our *message*, ensuring that the *message* is communicated meaningfully.

Take away points

1. Know that the Holy Spirit is the only One who can open the hearts of men and women and that he is the One who teaches and enlightens them in a way so that they can understand and obey. He is the One who transforms lives and cultures. We are just listening servants who apply humility and obedience to the task God has given us.

2. We contextualize the message, but God is the one who indigenizes it.

3. Globalization has brought to the world a universal culture. How does this change our understanding of indigenization? How does this affect our sharing of the gospel?

4. Explore how foreign concepts and practices have become integrated into a cultural context.

5. Reflect on the strategies you can employ to become an effective participant observer, demonstrating a nuanced perspective that encompasses both an insider's and an outsider's view of culture.

6. Serving with like-minded colleagues and local believers is crucial for effectively contextualizing the gospel message. By engaging with those who understand the local culture, traditions, and beliefs, we can ensure the message resonates with the audience. Can you identify colleagues or local believers within the culture who can help you communicate effectively and meaningfully within their community?

7. Everyone communicates their ideas, beliefs, and values very differently. Discover the way your people communicate. Know the *forms*, *meanings*, and *functions* in context. Understand and apply the concepts that linguists have used to contextualize the truth of the Scriptures in another culture. Knowing and applying these will enable us to become proficient communicators of the truth.

Hudson Taylor was a trailblazer in China and a trailblazer in adopting the principles of contextualization. We have a rich heritage and we do well to continue to emphasize the importance of this. As we, like Hudson Taylor, contextualize ourselves and our *message*, we will not only face personal challenges to our own cultural preferences, but will also, at times, find ourselves in opposition to our own cultural norms. The phrase "going native" is still a derogatory phrase used today for people like Hudson Taylor. When Taylor incorporated the core values of contextualization in the DNA of CIM/OMF, he realized the tremendous efforts and the significant amount of time that would be needed to learn proficiently the *language*, *culture*, and *worldview* of the Chinese people. As we strive to reduce as much as possible all the cultural barriers that separate people from Christ, we strive to identify as much as possible with the people we live among and become accepted by them. We exert the effort needed to do this due to our desire to become thoroughly competent cross-cultural Christian communicators. **MRT**

---

[1] Steve Bezner, *Your Jesus Is Too American: Calling the Church to Reclaim Kingdom Values over the American Dream* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2024).
[2] Alan Tippett, "Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?," in *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?*, ed. Tetsunao Yamamori and Charles R. Taber (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1975), 13–34.
[3] John Travis, "The C-1 to C-6 Spectrum," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (October 1998): 407–408. Books introducing the controversy involving highly contextualized "Christian" communities include the following: Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2009); Harley Talman and John Jay Travis, eds., *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015); and Doug Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology and Ecclesiology*, EMIS Dissertation Series (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University, 2011).
[4] Kenneth Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (Glendale, CA: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1954).
[5] For more on participant observation, see Danny L. Jorgensen, *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies*, Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol. 15 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1989); David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research: A Comprehensive Guide*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2021); David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*, 3rd ed., Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol. 17 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010); James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980).

Culture, Cultural Diversity, and the Good Life:

Reflections on Creation and Its Implications for the Church

Daniel

Serving with a Dutch mission organization within the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, Daniel is a coordinator and theological trainer in Asia. He is currently working on his PhD in missiology and intercultural studies.

An experience outside of Asia

The first years of my cross-cultural involvement were spent, not in Asia, but in Namibia, in Southern Africa. Its vast desert landscapes and small population—only 2.5 million people—place Namibia among the five least densely populated countries in the world.

If anything characterizes Namibian society, it is that people are very aware of their ethnic and cultural background. It was only in 1990 that Namibia became independent from South Africa and that the politics of apartheid—racial segregation—formally ended. As is the case with many oppressive regimes, the impact of apartheid lasted long after Namibia gained independence. One generation later, the colour of one's skin still mattered, and the ethnic/racial categories that were used to segregate people still very much functioned below the surface of society. Since Namibia is a predominantly Christian country, this is true in churches as well.

In this context, it was exciting to serve at a relatively small, interdenominational, and intercultural seminary. Among my favourite moments of the year is the annual photoshoot of the entire student body. It is a beautiful sight to see students of various shades—forgive me the language, but this was real!—from deep black to blonde-white—*exhibiting all the cultural and historical pain and conflict that these colours represent*—standing next to each other, giving their brightest smiles. These moments were great because I knew they were not faked. Throughout their studies, people from different cultural backgrounds would get to know each other personally. Prejudices were tested and often found to be not true. Genuine friendships developed across cultural barriers. People's self-esteem was changed, and mutual understanding of each other's past was cultivated. While some issues remained, there was also a genuine sense of unity in Christ. If only churches could be like this!

It was here that I truly came to understand that in Christ not only are we reconciled to God, but also to one another. And in a context like Namibia, a Christian community that embodies this reconciling power is a witness in itself. Local multicultural—also called *intercultural*—churches are missional in themselves.[1] Or at least, they add an extra dimension to the missional identity that should characterize each local church. This is what I understand to be part of "multicultural ecclesiology".[2]

As much as the Namibian students appreciated this experience of unity across cultural and ethnic boundaries, they also kept a keen interest in understanding how the gospel relates to their particular culture. Each group had its own story and its own worldview to relate the gospel to. And the question of contextualization—sometimes called *inculturation*—is as relevant to Christian mission as is multicultural ecclesiology.[3] In fact, for many cross-cultural workers, contextualization may even carry a stronger missional connotation than the idea of a multicultural church.

Multicultural Christian unity and contextualization—opposite directions?

Initially, I felt as if these two missional concepts pointed in two opposite directions in the interaction between gospel and culture. In the process of contextualization, we seek to communicate the gospel in ways that resonate with and transform specific cultural contexts. It emphasizes the value of cultural particularity. Multicultural ecclesiology, on the other hand, calls people from a variety of cultural contexts to come together in one gospel-shaped community. In Christian discourses in the United States, these two positions have been taken to their "extremes" in what is called the "homogenous unit principle" (HUP) of the church growth movement on the one hand, and the so called "multicultural mandate"—partly framed in response to the HUP—on the other.[4]

In fact, both multicultural Christian unity and contextualization reflect biblical principles and practices and can thus be based on strong

> … there is no blueprint—whether based on the Bible or on "best practices"—for being a church that embodies Christian unity in cultural diversity. What then, can guide us in making decisions in being church and the way we interact with cultural diversity? I believe that part of the answer lies in developing a biblical perspective on culture and cultural diversity.

We can only trace aspects of "culture" in the biblical narrative because we have some (basic) assumption of what culture is. "Culture" is notoriously difficult to define with precision because almost every element of human life that is not merely biological can somehow be connected to it.

biblical arguments. Theologians like to bring these two missional directions together in the phrase "Christian unity in cultural diversity."

If you have ever been involved in a multicultural or multiethnic Christian community, you can probably relate to the question of how to find a good balance between emphasizing Christian unity while at the same time doing justice to the members' particular cultural backgrounds. How many languages are used in worship? Who are in the church leadership? Is the main worship service the place to give attention to cultural diversity, or should this be done in small groups? How important is culture anyway? Should every church be multicultural or multiethnic, or is there space for monocultural churches as well? The questions can be multiplied.

After spending a number of years researching and being involved in multicultural churches, I have come to see that there is no blueprint—whether based on the Bible or on "best practices"—for being a church that embodies Christian unity in cultural diversity. What then, can guide us in making decisions in being church and the way we interact with cultural diversity? I believe that part of the answer lies in developing a biblical perspective on culture and cultural diversity. My aim in this article is to offer some thoughts in that direction. I hope to do this with enough clarity for you to see how the gaps could be filled, or where to make different choices in interpretation.

Reading the Bible with a missional hermeneutic

First let me clarify my hermeneutical lens in reading Scripture. I understand Scripture—from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to re-creation—to present a meta-narrative of what God is doing in this world. Kevin Vanhoozer introduced the concept of *theodrama*.[5] I find this a helpful way to understand how the Bible witnesses to God's actions in and for this world, and at the same time "draws us into" the biblical metanarrative to participate in God's plan for this world.[6]

God's actions in and for this world, to which the Bible bears witness, are *missional* in character. God, from the beginning, wants to be known for who he truly is, and he wants his creation to enjoy knowing him. He thus created the world out of love, and then continued to reach out to this world, and to humanity in particular. God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is, in all the ways in which he relates to the world, a *missionary God*.[7] The Bible's witness, then, is missional in character. And our participation in what God is doing is meant to be missional too. To paraphrase a well-known statement: it is not so much that the church has a mission; rather, the *mission of God* has the church.[8]



What, then, is the character of God's mission (and, thus, of ours)? Well, God wants to be known for who he truly is. And to know God is to have eternal life (John 17:3). The mission of the Triune God is life-giving. In Jesus' words: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10 ESV). The way he does this is by laying down his own life (John 10:17–18).

We can understand God's act of creation along the same lines. The mission of God did not begin *after* the fall. The creation itself—in which God gave life to all that lives—is an essential part of the mission of God.[9] Creation does not just "set the stage" for the rest of the biblical story; it provides a paradigm of God's intentions for life on earth. Elements of the creation accounts feature throughout Scripture, all the way into the eschatological visions of Revelation 21 and 22. Biblical theology, in my opinion, should include reflection on the God's plan for creation as we find this in the early chapters of Genesis. As Christians, we do so while reflecting on the unique and central place of Christ in God's revelation of God-self. In Jesus Christ, creation finds its ultimate purpose and goal (John 1:1–5 and Col 1:15–17).

This is relevant to the current discussion because God has given Adam and Eve—humanity—a specific task and role within his plan for creation. It is here that theologians see the beginning of *culture*. Following the line of thought so far, we can say that human cultural activity has a missional dimension, which needs to be understood in terms of what is life-giving. But this is to anticipate what is to come.

A working definition of culture

We can only trace aspects of "culture" in the biblical narrative because we have some (basic) assumption of what culture is. "Culture" is notoriously difficult to define with precision because almost

every element of human life that is not merely biological can somehow be connected to it. In a very basic sense, culture refers to how people think about and organize their life within a given context. It is a "guide for living"[10] that people follow, which has developed over time and which continuously changes and develops, both through how people in the present make use of its guidance and through the (sometimes violent) interaction with people holding other cultural perceptions.[11]

The British sociologist Bikhu Parekh brings these elements together in this definition: "Culture is a historically created system of beliefs and practices in terms of which a group of human beings understand, regulate and structure their individual and collective lives. It is a way of both understanding and organizing life."[12] Note that the word "life" occurs twice in this definition—and notice that Parekh includes beliefs. Worldviews and religious beliefs do influence how people think about life and how they find and give meaning to it.

Culture, in short, provides a guide for living for communities in their particular contexts *and* is at the same time continuously shaped by this actual living in these particular contexts. Cultures are neither static nor monolithic and, within cultural groups, there can be a strong debate about the right interpretation of cultural values—especially in the light of changing circumstances.[13] Individually, people may come to value elements of their culture quite differently than others. And over time, people may begin to identify more strongly with (elements of) other cultures, for example, because of migration. This last point marks a difference between ethnic identity and culture—with the former bearing a stronger primordial connotation.[14] The relation between ethnicity and culture is much more complex than simply stating that "culture X belongs to ethnic group X", although this statement reflects a basic point of departure for discussions on cultural diversity.

Finding culture in the creation accounts

In line with these preliminary thoughts, what are some of the key elements of a biblical theology of culture and cultural diversity? Let us begin at the beginning, by reading the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2.

Since culture is generally understood to be an aspect of human life (in contrast to the non-human world), authors usually begin their discussion of culture in the Bible with a reference to Genesis 1:28—sometimes referred to as the "cultural mandate".[15] Here, God tells the newly created man and woman to multiply and to fill the earth and to exercise dominion over the animal world and over all the earth. God thus bestows authority on mankind to rule over creation. It is clear that the right context for the use of this authority is in relationship with God. Mankind is created by God and created in God's image. God bestows his blessing on mankind so they will be able to fulfil their task. And *he* gives them this specific authority. The human role is to participate in God's work in creation, not to operate independently from him. This is particularly clear when these words are read in the context of the entire first creation account. For six days, God has been at work filling what was formless and empty (Gen 1:2) with material content and ordering this content. Although mankind's work is not of the same order—from a biblical perspective, only God *creates*[16]—it is to resemble God's work by continuing to fill the earth and to bring its matter to order.[17]



Genesis 2 provides a further explanation of the kind of authority humanity has received when Adam *names* the animals. In Genesis 1, *God* names whatever he created. But in the second chapter, Adam is invited to join in God's work by naming the animals. That is, he is to identify their distinct features—thus ordering them—and describe them accordingly.[18]

One more aspect to be noted here is the communal nature of humanity's task in God's creation. The *imago Dei* is mankind as male and female (Gen 1:27). Together they have received the blessing and the task from God, which includes human procreation. This emphasis is heightened in the second creation account, in Genesis 2, where the activity of naming the animals leads to the conclusion that *it is not good that the man should be alon*e and that the individual man needs a *helper* (Gen 2:18).

Genesis 2 brings one more insight to the "cultural mandate" by describing the task for which God put the man in the garden of Eden, namely, to "work" and to "keep" it (Gen 2:15 ESV). The immediate literary context seems to connect this task with *cultivation* of the ground, so as to provide food from the earth (plants and trees). The word "to keep" has a connotation of *protecting* the garden. In the light of Genesis 3, this can be understood as preventing anything harmful and unclean (sin!) from disturbing the life in the garden. Mankind, thus, has a role in bringing the life-giving potential of the garden to fruition, and to protect life within the garden. For the Hebrew reader of the Torah, these words—"to work" (*'abad*) and "to keep" (*shamar*)—bring to mind the description of the role of the priests and Levites in the tabernacle in Numbers 18, who are called to *guard* and to *serve*.[19] The task of working the garden and protecting it is, in a way, priestly.

Mankind thus finds itself alive—created (Gen 1:27); formed and with the breath of life (Gen 2:7, 23)—in a specific context—on earth; in the garden of Eden—addressed by his Creator-God, who is there and living and working

... human cultural activity is to be guided by God's intent for his creation. It is aimed at shaping human communal life (including procreation) in its natural environment and at bringing the natural environment to its potential by cultivating it and by protecting it. Human cultural activity, in short, is aimed at enabling and enhancing life—both human and non-human life.

in relationship with him. Human life, from the very beginning, exists in a web of relations. The primary relation is to God; then there is the relation with the human other (male-female) as well as with the rest of the created world (plants, animals, ground). Each of these relations defines the way mankind is to perform its task within creation.

Apart from Adam naming the animals, it is only after Genesis 1 and 2 that we read about people working the earth and using its resources for development of human life. In part, these activities carry God's blessing and thus may be seen as the actual outworking of the cultural mandate. At the same time, these accounts take place after the Fall and are mixed with notions of sin and distortion. It now requires discernment to distinguish the good and sinful in human cultural activity. The first two chapters of Genesis provide us with insights for how to discern the "good" from the sinful in human culture.

What we have seen, in summary, is that human cultural activity is to be guided by God's intent for his creation. It is aimed at shaping human communal life (including procreation) in its natural environment and at bringing the natural environment to its potential by cultivating it and by protecting it. Human cultural activity, in short, is aimed at enabling and enhancing life—both human and non-human life. This resonates well with the earlier definition of "culture". It takes place *coram deo*—in the presence of God and in relationship to him. It is priestly (Gen 2:15) and, in a way, *missional*—the entire earth is to be filled with people who know God and who live in relationship with him. All of the earth beyond the borders of the Garden is to be patterned and ordered to resemble the perfect Garden.[20] The fact that the first creation account culminates in Sabbath—the day of rest and worship of God (though worship is not limited to Sabbath alone)—provides one more purpose for cultural activity: it is aimed at praising God for his goodness and blessing, and to reflect these in all that humans do.[21]

A key in discerning goodness in human culture, even in our present day, is to see to what extent contemporary cultures enable and enhance life—life as God intended it.

Is cultural diversity part of God's creation?

But what about cultural differences and the misunderstandings these often cause? Is cultural diversity or plurality part of God's intent for creation or not? If yes, what is its purpose?

In order to answer these questions, theologians use two lines of argumentation based on Genesis 1 and 2. The first argument builds on the fact that the development of culture is closely related to the natural environment within which people live. Since God gave mankind the explicit command to fill the earth—to expand the borders of the garden until it covers all the earth—people would have come across different geographical contexts, which influence the way communities would shape their life in those contexts.[22] The assumption is that a strong sense of unity would remain—as all pre-Fall human life would be focused on the worship of God—but nonetheless human life would reflect the diversity that is part of the design of God's creation.

Although this argument makes sense, the fact that it is built on assumption, and given the fact that we can only observe actual cultural diversity *after* the Fall, it needs to be substantiated by later biblical "clues" on cultural diversity.

A second line of argumentation for cultural diversity focusses on the description of mankind as *imago Dei*. The text of Genesis does not give a clear definition and as a result the concept has been interpreted in various ways. One line of interpretation, which has gained ground in Protestant theology through Karl Barth, pays particular attention to the *relational* character of the *imago Dei*. Mankind, as image of God, exists as a bi-unity (male and female) and in that way reflects the tri-unity of God. This argument often includes a Trinitarian interpretation of the plural "us" in Genesis 1:26.[23] It is based on theological reflection on the nature of the Triune community and the relations between Father, Son, and Spirit. Father, Son, and Spirit neither exist independently of each other nor are subsumed in the other. The one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who love and completely know each other, and are who they are because of their relationship to each other.

As image of God, human beings also have their own distinct identities, yet these identities are only developed in relation to other human beings and to God. Mankind exists as "unity in diversity". David Stevens, who developed a biblical theology of multiethnicity in churches and strongly emphasizes this aspect of humanity, writes: "[T]he relational intimacy of the non-homogeneous Creator was reflected in his creation of humanity as the image of himself."[24] Relationality and being made for community-in-diversity are inherent to the image of God, as it reflects the Triune God's community in himself.[25] This unity-in-diversity is seen as the starting point of ethnic diversity, and by implication, cultural diversity.[26]

As with the first argument, this interpretation of the *imago Dei* as "relational unity in diversity" and its consequence for understanding cultural diversity, needs to be "tested" by a further reading of the biblical history. Given the limited space of this article, I can only briefly discuss some key moments in the biblical history.

Reading on in Genesis: cultural diversity as blessing or as punishment?

In Genesis 4 and onwards, we read how mankind shapes its life outside of the Garden. These chapters describe a mixed picture, with people cultivating the earth and developing certain lifestyles



Noah Leading the Animals into the Ark by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione. Brush and oil paint on brown laid paper, 39.4 x 54.8 cm. Public dommin. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.

and skills, with God's blessing—people continue to be born!—and with worship of YHWH still present, but also with violence, shameful acts, and bloodshed entering what seem to become "normal" patterns of human life. Human culture is no longer automatically centred around God's plan for life.

Although the flood erased whatever ethnic diversity existed among the people at that time, it did not erase mankind's status as image of God. (See God's confirmation in Gen 9:6.) Neither did it annul God's command to "be fruitful and multiply, to increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it" (9:7, ESV). The so-called Table of Nations in chapter 10 shows that mankind did multiply, and that the descendants of the sons of Noah did spread out over the earth.

The Table of Nations is not a mere list of descendants; it also emphasizes the variety in living places, languages, and social groupings of the people (Gen 10:4, 20, 31) and reflects, though by implication, ethnic and cultural diversity. One way or the other, God ensures that his plans are carried out! The order in which the narrative unfolds, with the Tower of Babel following on the Table of Nations, provides a theological background for the calling of Abram—and, in him, Israel—out of the nations. The aftermath of Babel is that God now relates to the nations in an immediate way, by means of his relationship with the descendants of Abram.

The narrative about the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 has been interpreted in various ways, each with consequences for how linguistic (also leading to ethnic and cultural) diversity is regarded. In my own Sunday school days, the confusion of languages was usually explained as a *punishment* for the human arrogance displayed in building the tower. The implication is that diversity—linguistic, but again, leading to ethnic and cultural plurality—holds a connotation of negativity, *as if it was not meant to be like this*.

It seems, however, that the issue at hand is not human arrogance as such, but the fact that the people do not want to fill the earth—as God has tasked them to do. The contrast is between God's vision of humanity spreading out over the earth under his direct authority and in reverence of his name and on mankind's vision of being united in one place in their own name (see Gen 11:4). God does not take issue with diversity—mankind does. And because God knows that his blessing—the blessing of YHWH—lies in the fulfilment of his intent for creation and humanity in it, he chooses to enforce it on humanity, even if this takes both them and himself on a much longer path to achieve his purposes. The result of the Tower of Babel is that people are now scattered "over the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:9 NIV).[27]

What is lost after Babel . . .

Something important is lost, however. And this is not just the possibility of easy communication among people groups. In fact, throughout Genesis, there is hardly any issue with linguistic barriers in cross-cultural communication. What is lost is the apparent possibility of direct communication with YHWH for all people. From Genesis 12 onwards, knowing YHWH and communicating with him is no longer a general privilege but is connected to a particular people—Abram and his descendants. It is true that people from other nations do fear YHWH (e.g., Abimelek and Melchizedek), but this now only becomes clear *as these people relate to* the family of Abram. And the other nations *can* receive God's blessing, but this, again, is *only as these nations relate to* the family of Abram, who was set as an instrument to channel God's blessing to the nations. On a positive note: in Genesis 12, there is no hint that other nations must leave all of their cultural and ethnic identity behind. Steven Bryan writes:

> in the divine vision revealed to Abraham, the peoples are to come together in a community of blessing with God in their midst as the ultimate source of blessing. This "blessing" … is a depiction of every people doing what they are meant to do – living with one another in righteousness and peace, but doing so in a myriad of expressions of the creative stewardship of God's creation.[28]

In Genesis, there are only a few hints of people having other gods (e.g., Gen 31:31–32).[29] From Exodus onwards, however, it is clear that Israel finds itself in a world in which the various nations each have their gods (e.g., Exod 15:11, 20:3). The nations around Israel have lost their immediate knowledge of God. Their cultural activity—the way they organize and shape their lives—is now guided by beliefs in other "gods".

David Stevens argues that Deuteronomy 32:8, in the song of Moses ("when the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind…" ESV), refers to the scattering of mankind at Babel. The last phrase of this verse reads either "according to the number of the sons of Israel" (NIV) or "according to the number of the sons of God" (ESV). Stevens follows this last reading, and

In our assessment of the cultures and contexts in which we find ourselves living and ministering, we can ask which elements of a certain culture are life-giving, or at least aimed at enabling and enhancing life. What kind of beliefs, or ideology, is behind these practices? Can these be points of connection with the message about Jesus, who has come to give life in its fullness?

argues that the "sons of God" refer to heavenly powers who belong to the heavenly council of God. In the New Testament, these are referred to as "authorities", "powers", "angels", "rulers", etc.[30] Stevens interprets Moses' words as meaning that "following the debacle of the Tower of Babel each nation/ethnicity of the world (with the exception of Israel) was assigned one or more members of the celestial court."[31] Some of these "sons of God" may have led the nations assigned to them into idolatry and so caused animosity among the nations. The book of Daniel, particularly chapters 9–11, seem to use similar imagery of angelic powers that are behind the actions of various nations and their leaders. Stevens applies this to contemporary cultural and ethnic division among people—"behind the divisions and resultant alienation – and even behind the sociological dynamics that contribute to the dividing walls – are the powers of the heavenly world that exert their malicious influence upon both society and church."[32]

Even though some of Stevens' exegesis and interpretation may require more discussion, he points to the important truth that, apart from the people of Israel, the nations generally no longer place the service and worship of YHWH in the centre of their communal life (although the Old Testament *does* mention representatives of the nations acknowledging YHWH, such as the queen of Sheba). Not only have the relations between nations become tense and often violent, but most important of all, there is no centre that can hold the nations together. Since the nations seek the centre of their focus and worship *within themselves* (their own gods), the result is cultural pride, ethnocentrism, and the practice of cultural assimilation of those who are less powerful than other nations.[33] When the ultimate point of reference that shapes cultural identity is placed *within* one's own group, this identity becomes absolutized. Only those who worship YHWH can find an ultimate point for cultural identity that is located *outside* their own group. This is just as true today as it was in biblical times, given the nationalistic ideologies and politics in many countries in our own time.

… and what is regained in Christ

Seen along these lines, one of the implications of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, and through the Spirit, people from all ethnic and cultural backgrounds are called to recentre their identity around their relation to Christ. *In Him all things hold together* (Col 1:17 ESV). This was as true—and difficult to grasp—for Jewish believers in the first century as it was (and is) for non-Jewish believers. In the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, *dividing walls* have been broken down (Eph 2:14). Through his resurrection, he has been exalted higher than any other authority or spiritual power (Eph 1:20–21). Further, the church of Christ is *the* renewed humanity. Jesus Christ is *the* new man (Eph 2:15), each believer is a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17) and in possession of a "new self", "created after the likeness of God" (Eph. 4:24). As the body of Christ, the new man, the church, represents—in unity to Christ—the new humanity, the new *imago Dei*.[34]

As Paul struggled to place the gospel of grace through faith in Christ at the centre of the proclamation of the early church, he understood that this not only had consequences for people's personal beliefs, it had socio-cultural consequences as well. When we keep in mind that many of the socio-cultural practices in Paul's days were deeply embedded in religious beliefs, we can understand why Paul worked so hard to relate these to Christ and to the message of the gospel (see Acts 15; Eph 2:11–22; Gal 3:28).

Although Paul has sometimes been interpreted as diminishing cultural differences to the point where they become irrelevant—*no more Greek, no more Jew*—this does not do justice to his efforts to present the gospel in ways that would be relevant to his audiences' worldview as he does, for example, in Acts 17 and in multiple letters.[35] The differences between people, either in gender, status, or culture (see the three pairs in Gal 3:28) are not eradicated; rather, in Christ, they are stripped of their dividing power.[36] The book of Revelation, finally, seems to give at least some space to the worship of God by people in their cultural particularity, although always in the presence of God *and* those of other cultures and people (Rev 5:9; 7:9; 21:24).[37]

Contours of a theology of culture

I have argued that the development of human culture is part of God's design for creation and that it signifies the way in which mankind is to participate in God's plan with his creation. God's purpose is that he be known for who he truly is. He is the God of life, and to know God is to have full, eternal life. For us human beings, life as God meant it to be means living in a right relation with God, with each other, and with the natural environment. Good living thus requires us to know the other for who he/she truly is, and to acknowledge that our identity is, in part, defined by our relation to the other. It requires us to maintain the integrity of the "other". This is true in the first place of God. We are to know him for who he truly is, and we need to praise and worship him for who he is. In relation to the human other, we need to appreciate the unique identity of the other, and yet we can joyfully relate to the other and seek to enhance the other's life. This is true for individuals, but also applies to all levels of human relations. Cultural differences are to be celebrated, as—in right relation to God—each culture reflects God's character in a unique way, and each culture exercises stewardship over God's creation in a unique way. In relation to the natural environment, "knowing" means that we appreciate the goodness of each element of creation, and that we use it in the way it is meant to be used so that its beauty comes out

... a multiethnic and multicultural Christian community is a powerful witness that the powers of racism, violence, and distrust cannot hold ground in the presence of God.... It means listening to each other's stories, both personal and cultural, that are often filled with pain, injustice, and distrust. It means listening to how Christians in each culture have struggled to relate the gospel to the values and beliefs of their own people, and to appreciate the ways in which insights from various cultures could help to better understand the gospel.

in the best way possible and can be used in service of our common life on earth.

Here, then, are some contours of a theological perspective on culture that can help us to think through the implications of the gospel in all areas of life. In our assessment of the cultures and contexts in which we find ourselves living and ministering, we can ask which elements of a certain culture are life-giving, or at least aimed at enabling and enhancing life. What kind of beliefs, or ideology, is behind these practices? Can these be points of connection with the message about Jesus, who has come to give life in its fullness? Which areas of any given culture or context stand in contrast with God's purposes for life? And how does the gospel address these issues? What would "fullness of life" look like in any given context, and how can and should human cultural activity be transformed to contribute towards this fullness of life?

In relation to the culturally "other", recognizing each other under the lordship of God and Jesus Christ leads to joined worship. It may lead to reconciliation over wrongdoings of one group against the other. It should lead to repentance over injustices, to actively seeking ways to restore shalom and, when necessary, to repay what was taken unjustly. Mutual cultural enrichment may mean sharing of cultural wisdom in the light of the gospel, remembering that much of the biblical wisdom literature reflects wisdom of other nations! It may also result in the exchange of resources. In contexts—like Namibia—where one's ethnic or cultural background often indicates their socio-economic status and opportunities in life, those who *have* may be called to share with those who do not yet have.

In conclusion

It is clear that, as long as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, human cultures often stand under the influence of sin, since many people still do not follow Christ in their individual and communal lives. I do not envision it as our aim to change all of society, by way of a "Christian revolution". The social impact of a Christian presence has often been at a local level. Hardly ever have Christian values lovingly been put in place by human governments. We will have to wait for the full revelation of the kingdom of God in glory for *all* of human life on earth to be placed in right relation to God. What I do believe to be the calling of the church in any cultural context, is to be a *firstfruits*—to be a culturally relevant *sign* of the kingdom of God.

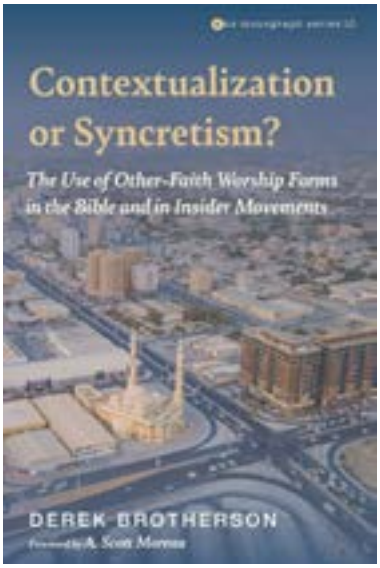
In a context like Namibia, a multiethnic and multicultural Christian community is a powerful witness that the powers of racism, violence, and distrust cannot hold ground in the presence of God. It means recognizing the fact that the Spirit of God has reached out to people from so many different cultural backgrounds. It means listening to each other's stories, both personal and cultural, that are often filled with pain, injustice, and distrust. It means listening to how Christians in each culture have struggled to relate the gospel to the values and beliefs of their own people, and to appreciate the ways in which insights from various cultures could help to better understand the gospel. Multicultural worship in Namibia means giving leadership to various people and giving space to the languages and music styles of the cultures present. I trust you can connect these thoughts to your own ministry contexts, wherever you work.

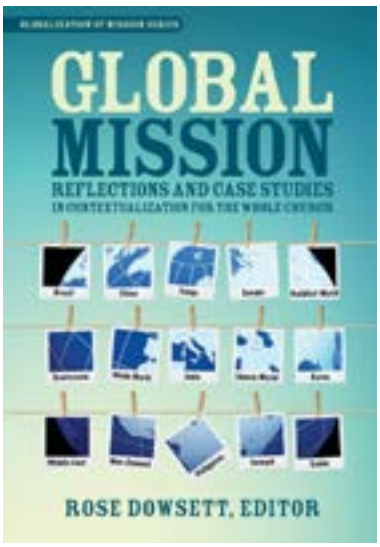
Although forming such a community or church may not be possible in every context, one thing is certain—my experience of a multiethnic and multicultural Christian community has had a lasting impact on me. In multicultural churches, where unity in diversity is truly valued, I can sense a realization of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:18 that, together with all the saints, we may come to understand all dimensions of the love of Christ—a love that even surpasses knowledge, and a love that means life. **MRT**

---

[1] See Safwat Marzouk, *Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for the Age of Migration* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 10, 172.
[2] For this phrase, see Harvey Kwiyani, *Multicultural Kingdom: Ethnic Diversity, Mission and the Church* (London: SCM, 2020), 109.
[3] See Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 326–353.
[4] See Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).
[5] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).
[6] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Drama-of-Redemption Model," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. G. T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 144.
[7] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 399–400.
[8] See Christopher J. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 62.
[9] Christian J. Anderson, "Beginning at the Beginning: Reading *Missio Dei* from the Start of the Bible," *Missiology* 45 (2017): 416.
[10] William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017), 19; Steven M. Bryan, *Cultural Identity and the Purposes of God: A Biblical Theology of Ethnicity, Nationality and Race* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2022), 22.
[11] See Henning Wrogemann, trans. by Karl Böhmer, *Intercultural Hermeneutics: Intercultural Theology Volume One* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 85.
[12] Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 143.

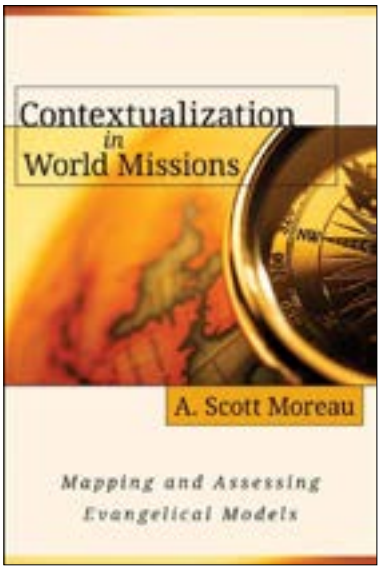
[13] Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 85.
[14] Aaron Kuecker, "Ethnicity and Social Identity," in J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 65–66.
[15] Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 170. The phrase "cultural mandate" finds its origin in Dutch Reformed discourse on the scope of salvation, as it is sought to apply to all areas of life. See e.g. N. Gray Sutanto, "Cultural Mandate and the Image of God: Human Vocation under Creation, Fall and Redemption," *Themelios* 48, no. 3 (2023): 592–604.
[16] The Hebrew verb ברא (*br'*), when used in the sense "to create", always has God as its subject or implied agent–not human beings. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, "ברא," *NIDOTTE* 1: 728–35.
[17] Christopher Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation: Genesis 1 and 2 as Tools of Cultural Critique* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017), 102–104.
[18] Watkin, *Thinking Through Creation*, 108–109.
[19] This is only one of multiple indicators that the tabernacle and the temple in Israel were regarded as representing the garden of Genesis 2. See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 66. See also Bryan, Cultural Identity and the Purposes of God, 56–57.
[20] Thanks to Walter McConnell for pointing out to me that human work beyond the borders of the Garden was to make the "non-Garden to become like the Garden." The Garden thus functions as a God-given "model" after which the earth "beyond the Garden" was to be ordered and patterned by man. See Walter McConnell, "'And Let them Rule': Humanity's Relationship with God and Creation," in *A Dialogue between Now and Eternity: Biblical Studies and Exegesis* (Singapore: Singapore Bible College, 2007), 137, https://www.academia.edu/8679020/_And_Let_them_Rule_Humanity_s_Relationship_with_God_and_Creation.
[21] Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 227.
[22] David E. Stevens, *God's New Humanity: A Biblical Theology of Multiethnicity for the Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 69; Keith Ferdinando, "The Ethnic Enemy – No Greek, or Jew… Barbarian, Scythian: The Gospel and Ethnic Difference," *Themelios* 33, no. 2 (2008): 57.
[23] It must be noted that this line of argumentation is influenced by systematic theological reflection on these biblical texts. Some may argue that it carries interpretative "luggage" with it that goes beyond what the immediate literary context suggests. See e.g. John Golgingay, *Old Testament Theology Volume One: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 102–105.
[24] Stevens, *God's New Humanity*, 51.
[25] Stevens, *God's New Humanity*, 56.
[26] Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 177.
[27] Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 189–90.
[28] Bryan, *Cultural Identity and the Purposes of God*, 102.
[29] Although the text of Genesis does not thematize idolatry/the presence of other gods explicitly, some key texts of Genesis (e.g. the creation account, the narrative of the flood, and the Noah account) are widely considered to be (polemical) corrections to similar accounts from ANE literature in which gods play a role. With reference to the creation account, see Walter McConnell, "You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me: God and the Gods in the Pentateuch," *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 13, no. 1 (2005): 21–22, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360997633_W_McConnell_-_%27You_shall_have_no_Other_Gods_before_Me%27_God_and_the_Gods_in_the_Pentateuch_-_Journal_of_Asian_Evangelical_Theology_2005_19-46.
[30] Stevens, *God's New Humanity*, 81.
[31] Stevens, *God's New Humanity*, 85.
[32] Stevens, *God's New Humanity*, 90.
[33] Ferdinando, "The Ethnic Enemy," 58–59.
[34] Stevens, *God's New Humanity*, 109,
[35] Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 138–39.
[36] Ronald Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 175–76; Ferdinando, "The Ethnic Enemy," 60–61.
[37] Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 224–31.

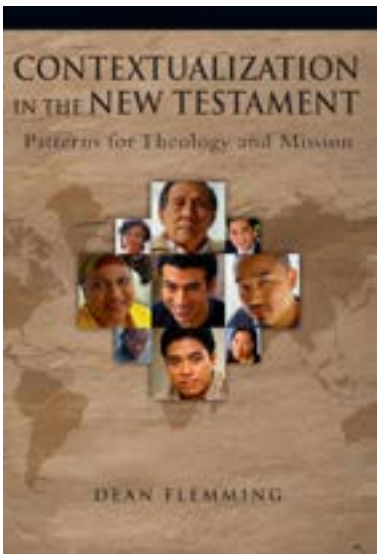




Challenge yourself to read one of the following books within the next year so that you can grow in your understanding and practice of contextualization.

Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and expanded (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002)
Derek Brotherson, *Contextualization or Syncretism? The Use of Other-Faith Worship Forms in the Bible and in Insider Movements*, Evangelical Missiological Society Monograph Series (Salem, OR: Pickwick, 2022)
Rose Dowsett, ed., *Global Mission: Reflections and Case Studies in Contextualization for the Whole Church* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2011)
Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005)
David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2000)
Jerry Hwang, *Contextualization and the Old Testament: Between Asian and Western Perspectives*, Logia Series (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2022)
Charles H. Kraft, *Issues in Contextualization*, 2nd ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2016)
A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012)
Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP and Exeter: Paternoster, 1979 and Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2003)
Gailyn Van Rheenen, ed., *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2005)
Brad Vaughn, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015)





"Mission With"—Moving Beyond Reductionism

Sam Wunderli



After his theological studies at Chrischona (TSC) in Switzerland, and the Intercultural Studies at CIU, USA, Sam joined OMF in 1990. He and his wife Monika with their two daughters became part of the Shan church planting team in North Thailand until 1999. After some regional leadership roles, he served as Mekong Field Leader from 2003 to 2014. In 2015, he joined the International Leadership Team and later served as Assistant General Director. During this time, he completed his DMin studies with Fuller Theological Seminary, USA. He continues to serve in leader development in OMF and the Lausanne Movement.

In their recent book, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Julie A. Green address the major challenge of missions in the twenty-first century by describing it as a move from "*mission to*" towards "*mission with.*"[1] They use the phrase "mission to" to label patterns of cultural dominance in mission practice. In the new polycentric context of missions in the twenty-first century, Lingenfelter advocates for a much more challenging approach that he calls "mission with" as the appropriate response in the light of today's global church.

Finishing the task as the central challenge

Lingenfelter is not the first to highlight an aspect of missions as the central challenge in the current mission context of the twenty-first century. The "Finishing the Task Coalition" that started in the year 2000 in Amsterdam with 13,000 Christian leaders—following Billy Graham's invitation to meet in order to consider the final frontiers of missions—was an earlier version of this effort.[2] The systematic follow-up on some 3,600 peoples, many of them in the category of "unengaged unreached people groups (UUPG)," was the special focus from the beginning, as Rick Warren recalls. It resulted in about 1,600 mission agencies, denominations, and churches joining the "Finishing the Task Coalition" in order to see churches established among all these peoples. The various versions of the Great Commission found in the Gospels and in Acts, and the vision given in Revelation 5 and 7 about people from *every* nation, tribe, and language standing before the throne of God, inspire these efforts at the theological level.

On the practical side, this coalition is driven by the church in North America, which has initiated and provided money to direct the execution of the project. After retiring from the senior pastor position at Saddleback Church, Rick Warren took up leading this coalition. His goal is to establish a church within walking distance of every person on this planet by AD 2033—the 2,000-year anniversary since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The desire to fulfil both the Great Commission and the Great Commandment is at the heart of this effort to "finish the task". Some critics of the approach complain that it is far too much on the "managerial side" of mission and question to what degree and in what ways people from outside the US can be involved in moving and shaping this effort.

Not a task but local worshipping communities as the core emphasis

In contrast, the question of whether mission qualifies as "a task" is articulated by Paul Bendor-Samuel, Executive Director of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies in the UK. In an effort to overcome what he sees as the "singular approach" of the so called "Christendom paradigm" rooted in the colonial era, he advocates that we trust God who is already at work even in places without any church. Emphasizing the need to shift from "the command to go" to the "invitation to come"—since "Matt 28 alone is a burden Jesus did not intend us to carry"[3]—he promotes a "polycentric approach" in which "the gospel of the Kingdom is no longer dependent on individual cross-cultural servants but local worshipping communities of disciples."[4] While it is true that God is at work even before any of his messengers enter a place and while the intertwined point in Bendor-Samuel's explanations that obedience flows from intimacy with Christ requiring a coming to him first in response to his invitation makes perfect sense, his ultimate questioning the language about "unreached" raise questions that are pending answers.

Bendor-Samuel's emphasis on a "polycentric approach" in missions aims to take the unparalleled growth and

diversity of churches in Latin America, Africa, and Asia seriously in the way we talk and pursue mission in today's global context.[5] He points out that "mission is God's," an insight first articulated in 1934 by the German missiologist Karl Hartenstein, who coined the term *missio Dei* to distinguish it from the *missio ecclesiae*, the mission of the church. Yet Bendor-Samuel further states that "God is mission" and "mission is God's."[6] The progression to equating God and mission in the statement "God is mission" while also declaring that "mission is not a task" is, in fact, an attempt to redefine things semantically, as the term "task" is frequently used as a synonym for "mission". While his statement may initially sound sophisticated, upon further reflection, it is rather confusing.

As Piper pointed out, "mission is not first and ultimate; God is. And these are not just words."[7] According to Piper, "being satisfied with God" is the ultimate, and this is the heart of worship. He thus came to the profound conclusion that "worship is the goal and the fuel of missions: Missions exists because worship doesn't."[8] From this perspective, the statement "God is mission" becomes problematic. If God is "ultimate," and worshiping him, as Piper explains, is the "goal" of mission, mission has a culmination point. Thus, mission will not last forever—as God and worship will—but will one day be finished. That will be the day when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14). Mission, rooted in the Father's sending of the Son, and the Son's sending of the Spirit who works through the church to accomplish God's mission, has therefore all the features of a task with a starting and ending point.[9] It is, first and foremost, God's task to which he invites all those to participate who have found their satisfaction in him.

Yahweh on a mission

Yahweh, the God of Abraham, set this task in motion when he promised to bless all families on earth through Abraham. This promise shows that Yahweh is on a mission (Gen 12:3). Yahweh again spoke through Isaiah, saying: "I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians, to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations" (Isa 66:19). The "I will" points to Yahweh as the initiator of world missions. And Yahweh will again make sure that "the full number of Gentiles has come in" (Rom 11:25). He will bring the task to a conclusion. Yet, how will he finish this task? Will he do it through the "Finishing the Task Coalition" under Rick Warren's lead? Or will he do it, as Bendor-Samuel argues, through the "local worshipping communities of disciples" in which the gospel of the kingdom is no longer dependent on individual cross-cultural servants? Or will he do it somehow differently through his global church, or through his word and visions of Jesus? The amount of effort that has gone into promoting various approaches and priorities indicates that we are not just dealing with rhetorical issues.

Abandoning colonial mission rhetoric as the twenty-first century mandate

The debate about the appropriate focus in missions in the twenty-first century is not just raging in the post-colonial British context but has also been taken up by North American voices like Michael W. Stroope, who outlined a similar perspective in his book *Transcending Mission*. Since the Latin term "mission" was for the first time extensively used by Jesuits in their venture beyond the bounds of Europe in the sixteenth century when Spain and Portugal emerged as colonial powers, Stroope promotes a move beyond such "mission rhetoric." He sees "mission" associated with conquest, colonialism, paternalism, and much more. To "live as pilgrims in the way of the kingdom … give[ing] witness to family and friends of the kingdom's power to confront and transform," is the terminology Stroope proposes to replace the "mission rhetoric."[10]

Reflecting on phrases Stroope has promoted, such as "live as pilgrims," the "way of the kingdom," and being "a witness to family and friends" in order "to confront and transform," will make it clear that these words are biblical and meaningful. We should use them. Furthermore, we *must* live them! But should this new terminology simply replace the similarly biblical concept of "being sent" that is so central to the Bible's narrative, particularly the Gospel of John? John repeatedly portrays Jesus as the One who was sent by the Father. This culminates in Jesus' statement that "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). Stroope is correct that the Latin-rooted term "mission" is not found in the New Testament text as it was written in Greek. Yet the Greek term αποστέλλω is, in fact, translated "to send," and thus corresponds to the English term "mission".

And while Stroope is right to alert us that the Latin-based word "mission" later became associated with many facets that extend beyond the original New Testament meaning, I share Mark Oxbrow's disappointment in his final assessment:

> Stroope takes over 350 pages to demolish the edifice of 'mission' rhetoric whilst hinting all along that a much better future awaits those who



Finishing the Task Conference in Rwanda in 2023. Source: Finishing the Task.

Elevating what is dear and comes to us naturally as the central aspect happens all too easily. That is why the tendency to use reduced tasks for defining mission is not unique to thrusts like Finishing the Task, but it is equally relevant when stressing the role of the "local worshipping communities of disciples" in any given context. The challenge of learning to function together as the body of Christ with different members who all play a key part is therefore increasingly important in today's reality.

> desire to express God's purposes for, and work in, our world, but when the time comes, he provides less than 30 pages of argument for his alternative proposal. I found myself saying, yes to the kingdom of God theology, yes to the motif of pilgrimage and an even bigger yes to the recovery of biblical 'witness' language but without discovering any secure rhetorical framework which even began to replace the amazing richness of *missio Dei* theology.[11]

The concept of "being sent" thus remains a core scriptural aspect of our use of the term "mission." Getting rid of "mission rhetoric" in order to wash our hands of the shadowy parts that sadly later also became linked to Christian mission is a rather questionable strategy. While Stroope did a great job in shedding light on those shadowy aspects, he, at the same time, chose not to mention other equally if not more important facts. For instance, William Carey was forced to leave the British Indian territory in Calcutta because of fears that he might interfere with the practices of the profit-oriented British company.[12] Consequently, he joined the Baptist missionaries in the Danish colony in Serampore, where he started schools for impoverished children. This is just one of the numerous examples Stroope could have mentioned as an instance of "living as pilgrims in the way of the kingdom" from the past three centuries. It is also one that took place in the early stage of Protestant mission in the context of colonialism with all its dark sides. His selective approach results in a book that sounds convincing, but is, in fact, severely out of balance and therefore misleading. Both the many mission highlights and shadowy parts should be remembered.

The critique of reductionism

Going back to Paul Bendor-Samuel's notion that "Mission is not a task," we find him raising another question in a different text from his pen followed by a rather rushed conclusion. "When will missions be finished? … Reductionism in different forms arises from seeing missions as task." As he questions whether mission even exists as a task that can be finished, he portrays efforts like Finishing the Task as "mission by management" that sees mission as something that depends on technique and strategy.[13] As he further explains, this has resulted in a reductionism that has compartmentalized mission into evangelism, church planting, and compassionate service.

The concern voiced is legitimate as these tendencies are real. But whether they simply stem from an emphasis on mission as a task is questionable. A deeper cause is likely found in the fact that all of us tend to focus on what corresponds with our own gifting, personality, training, personal interests, and perspectives, which then finds expression in the kind of task we get involved in. Moreover, those of us who come from an achievement-driven context that sees tasks as the primary focus are prone to put a higher value on completing tasks at the cost of people and relationships. In such situations, "the blessed diversity of multinational teams—the body of Christ in action for God's mission to the world—implodes when we—in pride about 'my way' of life and 'my certainty' about how things should be done—insist that partnership and teamwork be done by 'my authority' in 'my ways'," as Julie Green describes such scenarios so accurately.[14] The case studies in *Teamwork Cross-Culturally* cover multiple stories which are linked to a quadrant-grid of four socio-cultural frames associated with four biblical images of leadership such as a steadfast apostle, a loving shepherd, faithful steward, and a wise and humble servant. They thus provide practical insights of what Christ-centered solutions can look like.[15]

Elevating what is dear and comes to us naturally as the central aspect happens all too easily. That is why the tendency to use reduced tasks for defining mission is not unique to thrusts like Finishing the Task, but it is equally relevant when stressing the role of the "local worshipping communities of disciples" in any given context. The challenge of learning to function together as the body of Christ with different members who all play a key part is therefore increasingly important in today's reality.

Beyond that, the idea that each local community within the global church shares in the responsibility that includes their own Jerusalem and cross-cultural Samaria around them, as well as the ends of the earth, as the Lord leads them, is in danger of being reduced to the local context only. This easily becomes another form of reductionism with "missions at the doorstep" becoming both the start and end points. The emphasis on "local worshipping communities of disciples" to replace "individual cross-cultural servants" can even grow into a new form of neocolonialism that prescribes to the rest of the world what doing missions should look like today according to a UK-defined paradigm. Yet again, this danger is not unique to just one party. Whoever believes they know how mission is to be pursued today and comes out with sweeping statements is in danger of creating another form of "managerial mission" by prescribing an approach that might be well suited in some places, but not at all in others. That is why discernment for local contexts beyond recognizing global trends is essential.

Paying attention to "stages of the work" in different contexts

While the recognition of trends in mission is important, paying attention to the "uniqueness of the local" is equally if not even more important, as Paul

Bendor-Samuel in fact also recognizes.[16] Regardless of global trends, it is far from true that the spiritual landscape is basically the same across our planet. The fact that today some believers can be found in every country of the world does not mean that everyone has equal accessibility to the gospel. In addition, while in some contexts the good news has been available for centuries, in others, it has never been heard even up to today. Local situations are far from being the same in many ways. That is why paying attention to "stages of the work" with regard to mission is so important, as it helps us gain insight into the kind of contribution and participation that exists in a given context. In recent years, defined "stages of the work" have proven most useful in OMF's efforts concerning The Task Unfinished. They help to discern what still needs to be done and how to best partner in a given local situation. Insight into the stages of the work also indicates how much cross-cultural involvement for being a viable witness and to disciple receptive people is still needed in a given context.



The significance of the "Macedonia Call"

This prompts some reflections on Paul the apostle, a man from Tarsus in Asia Minor. After parting with Barnabas and choosing Silas to accompany him, he focused his mind on the interior of Asia Minor. Having grown up on the doorstep of this region, Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, knew the region intimately and had a natural desire to reach it with the gospel. It took the Spirit of God to hinder him and his team from doing so, as the Spirit redirected them to see the needs beyond Asia Minor (Acts 16:7–10). As a result, the team arrived at Troas where Paul had that nighttime vision of a man from Macedonia begging him to come over and help them. This made them conclude "that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:10). It is important to note that although the vision included a man from Macedonia begging Paul, it was not a person from Macedonia who invited him and his team to come over. The vision was plainly an act of God calling them. It shows that God had his eyes on people in Macedonia, Achaia, and even Illyricum who were unknown to Paul and his team at that point. The incident indicates that God, through his Spirit, calls his servants out of regions they know and are familiar with to places where he sees a need. It was God calling Paul and his team to Europe, not any European inviting them. God wanted Paul to "neglect" the region he knew and engage neglected places that were beyond his awareness. God still does this today, in many different ways. The time of people receiving a "Macedonian call" is not over. We are well advised to encourage obedience whenever the Lord of mission calls his servants today to move beyond what is just at their doorstep.

The significance of "near-culture believers"

Believers who are culturally and often also geographically close to those who are least reached are at the same time frequently those best suited for sharing the good news in nearby regions. The fact that Paul had Epaphroditus from Philippi join the team, Aristarchus from Thessalonica, and Epaphras from Colossae—to mention just a few among the almost forty local workers of Paul's network—shows how the Spirit used him to set an example of involving those close to the local context from the very beginning of Christian mission. In many ways, this was the first step toward "mission with," the concept we will focus on more as we draw toward a conclusion with regard to the reflections in this article. What Paul did after parting ways with Barnabas shows that the "mission with" concept started to sprout at the outset of missions to the Gentiles.

Further, Paul's unstoppable drive to bring the gospel to Tarshish, a place mentioned in Isaiah (66:19)—as Paul must have been aware—was an effort to bring the gospel to what was the ends of the earth in Paul's days—the far West.[17] Tarshish represents the "unengaged unreached". To reach these people, Paul saw the need to enlist those believers in closest proximity to them to engage in this endeavor. Paul envisioned that Christians from Rome would join in this task. That is why he devoted the quiet winter months of AD 56–57 to pen one of the most brilliant texts in the New Testament to those Christians geographically closest to Tarshish. The fact that he had never personally met most of them was likely a key reason for making such an effort to establish a rapport with them by imparting some of what the Lord had given him (Rom 1:11). As a result, they would assist him on his journey to Spain (Rom 15:24). That is why the book of Romans is not first of all a doctrinal letter for personal edification, but a "charter for world

God wanted Paul to "neglect" the region he knew and engage neglected places that were beyond his awareness. ... The time of people receiving a "Macedonian call" is not over. We are well advised to encourage obedience whenever the Lord of mission calls his servants today to move beyond what is just at their doorstep.

… the Lord had to employ multiple means from not allowing Paul to preach in Galatia over weeks, followed by an impressive dream to get Paul moving beyond Asia Minor. … Having experienced God's directing beyond what Paul had in mind before, it resulted in the most profound theological reflections in letter form and eventually in a much wider step from Rome in a mission trip to the far West, the farthest known region in those days.

missions" as Thomas Schirrmacher compellingly calls it by supporting his perspective with ample evidence.[18]

Initial signs of the "mission with" concept

Yet, Paul does not superimpose himself over the Christians in Rome, but rather aims to connect with them personally as a co-laborer through his most elaborate, carefully crafted writing as he sought to win them to join in his struggles (Rom 15:30) to share the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16) with those outside the reach of the existing churches.[19] This is another carefully thought and prayed through strategic effort of "mission with," to use Lingenfelter's phrase. It is good to remind ourselves that, among the Christians in Rome, those from a Gentile background were particularly strong because of Emperor Claudius' expulsion of all Jews from Rome from about AD 41–53. This means that Paul was counting on Gentiles—and specifically ones who were not the fruit of his ministry—to join the cause of God's mission to the ends of the earth. This indeed was a new chapter of "mission with" beyond what was articulated up to this point when Paul wrote the letter to the Christians in Rome in those winter months at Cenchreae near Corinth. Without using terms like "mission with" or "polycentric sending structure," Paul's efforts with regard to the Christians in Rome did in fact expand the main mission centers from Jerusalem and Antioch so far to also include Rome. Hence the notion that the concepts of "mission with" as well as "polycentric" in fact strongly surfaces in Romans, a masterpiece of theological writing in which Paul aspired to mobilize the recipients for his mission to Spain.

When we compare the relatively short step of crossing the northeast corner of the Aegean Sea from Troas to Philippi with the geographically much bigger step from Rome to Spain—for which Paul aimed to recruit the believers in Rome to join him in his mission beyond the gospel expansion so far—it becomes apparent that the Lord had to employ multiple means from not allowing Paul to preach in Galatia over weeks, followed by an impressive dream to get Paul moving beyond Asia Minor. It indicates how much it takes to expand the perspective of committed workers beyond regions at their doorstep. Interestingly, the vision for those in regions beyond the reach of the gospel in Spain grew out of theological reflections on the journey of obedience towards God's guidance in Paul's life. Having experienced God's directing beyond what Paul had in mind before, it resulted in the most profound theological reflections in letter form and eventually in a much wider step from Rome in a mission trip to the far West, the farthest known region in those days.

Moving beyond reductionism

Ten years ago, OMF International started a special mobilization thrust under the heading "The Task Unfinished." Efforts linked to this thrust began in 2015, which marked the 150th anniversary of CIM/OMF. "Facing a task unfinished" is the first phrase of a hymn first published in 1930 by Frank Houghton, who later became CIM's fourth General Director. Getty Music introduced a revised version of this missions hymn as OMF's seven-year thrust of The Task Unfinished progressed. Related efforts by OMF resulted in further research with a focus on the least reached, more clarity about the "stage of the work" among different peoples in various places, as well as more intentionality and local collaboration.

Reflection on the arguments raised by Bendor-Samuel and Stroope requires that we ask whether we have been misguided for decades, if not centuries, in our understanding of mission as a "task" to be completed. Or should we decide to join the "Finishing the Task Coalition" in an effort to bring "closure" to the Great Commission?[20] Let's dare to reflect honestly as we face these questions that touch on the heart of Christian mission and the focus it should have in today's context.

The earlier reflections affirmed mission to be a task—though God's task—in which he involves his church, the body of Christ. The notion that this *task* perspective is the root cause for reductionism was identified as questionable. At the same time, a reductionism of another form was pointed out—one that promotes missions as merely a local activity. Yet, while such regional efforts are key at this stage of the work on a global scale, the responsibility of each community of the global church "to preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15) is still relevant and includes a mandate beyond the local context to the ends of the earth, wherever that is in today's context.

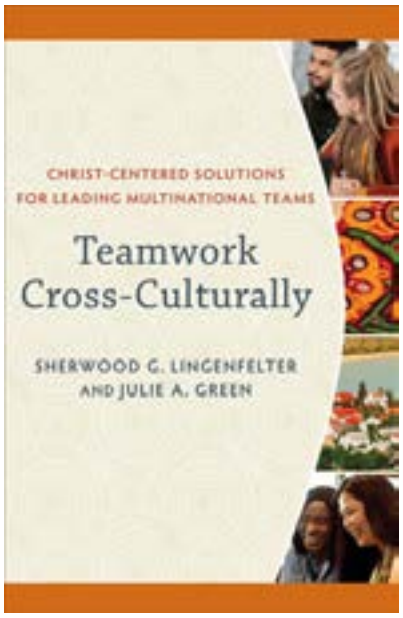
"Mission with" by working "in Christ" together within his global body

It is most encouraging that God, the originator of missions, calls people from an increasingly diverse number of local contexts to participate in his mission that places them in foreign lands. This

Reflection on the arguments raised by Bendor-Samuel and Stroope requires that we ask whether we have been misguided for decades, if not centuries, in our understanding of mission as a "task" to be completed.

creates a new challenge beyond what we have faced so far. It is, at the same time, a new opportunity—an opportunity for "mission with," as Sherwood Lingenfelter calls it. The "mission with" concept takes both the received commission and the call to be a witness to the ends of the earth, including the last neglected frontiers, very seriously. At the same time, it promotes collaboration in multinational teams so that we learn to act together "in Christ".

While Lingenfelter and Green had not intended to focus on reductionism in their book, they noted the temptation of the "old colonial option," as they call it, of "mission within my own sphere of power and influence."[21] Facing the challenges of cross-cultural communication and decision making with coworkers of different backgrounds, they point out that many have already given up on the concept of "mission with" as they choose to stay within their own national and denominational cultures in the way they participate in missions. A one-sided emphasis on local worshipping communities combined with a discouragement of cross-cultural efforts potentially enhances the avoidance tendencies towards the complex challenges that have become normal within the global church of the twenty-first century. Rather than shrinking back from this challenge, Lingenfelter and Green advocate that we face the "wicked problems" that have become part of the post-modern mission field with participants from everywhere. In doing so, they are borrowing aspects from Keith Grint's differentiation between "critical problems," "tame and complex problems," and finally "wicked problems." The expression "wicked problem" is originally a technical term. As such, it had nothing to do with problems of evil but is simply intended to describe something that cannot be solved easily.[22] Let's briefly look at this.



Addressing the challenge of "wicked problems"

Lingenfelter and Green employ Grint's term but move beyond his use of it by identifying the "struggle … against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil" (Eph 6:12) as the ultimate reason for the great challenge of "wicked problems" in cross-cultural teamwork. Learning to act and to respond "in Christ" is really at the heart of what is needed. Lingenfelter thus points out that Paul, in experiencing deep frustration and even anger over what we could label "wicked problems" in his dealing with the Corinthian church, as one example, was led by the Holy Spirit to discover a pathway and power to engage with such a situation and related interpersonal conflicts. It reflects that in Christ "old things" of family and culture have passed away to make space for "the new"—the reconciled ways in Christ (2 Cor 5:17).[24]

Lingenfelter and Green advocate moving beyond reductionism in any form and working in multinational and multidenominational teams regardless of "wicked problems" that commonly challenge such efforts. In doing so and not shrinking back from such a vivid expression of today's global church in addressing the still unfinished task together, Lingenfelter and Green present cross-cultural teamwork as the core challenge of the twenty-first century.

cross-cultural teamwork in missions. Many practical and cultural struggles, of course, are integral to these challenges. Wicked problems tend to have a soft and often spiritual nature combined with cultural blind spots that are linked to the deception we so commonly face in this world. Some are organizational, others interpersonal, such as value conflicts, personal hungers, and spiritual self-deception. In contrast to "critical problems" that can be addressed with a correct answer, or "tame and complex problems" that require a relevant management process to see progress, "wicked problems" are much more challenging as there are no off-the-shelf solutions or processes that render the right outcome. Wicked problems cannot be "solved". As they resist management solutions, they are labeled "wicked". "Effective leaders and 'soft power' may cobble together temporary 'clumsy' solutions that ameliorate internal conflict until the next crisis."[23] It is the realization of this nature of the problems we face that calls for Christ-filled solutions in Lingenfelter and Green advocate moving beyond reductionism in any form and working in multinational and multidenominational teams regardless of "wicked problems" that commonly challenge such efforts. In doing so and not shrinking back from such a vivid expression of today's global church in addressing the still unfinished task together, Lingenfelter and Green present cross-cultural teamwork as the core challenge of the twenty-first century. They challenge us to engage in God's mission—the frequently mentioned "*missio Dei*"—by following our God of mission and embracing *his* example. The Father sent the Son. The Son left the familiar territory of heaven and entered a wicked world. The Son and the Father sent the Sprit. The Spirit, who did not back away from dwelling in fallen humans, teamed up with these fallible beings who in so many ways, even as believers, remain incarcerated in their terrestrial local culture with so many blind spots that easily become entry points for the divisive influence of forces



opposing God's mission. Yet despite this, God's Spirit not only cooperates with those culturally close to us but also with those totally different. He breaks down walls of animosities and brings people together as he did with Jews and Greeks in New Testament times to display the new "in Christ" nature of his people. This is the kind of witness God wants to establish through his mission—the *missio Dei*. Anything short of this divine goal will be reductionistic in some form.

Acting and responding "in Christ"

It is beyond the scope of this short article to go into the thought-provoking details of how Lingenfelter relates the "prototype social frames of leadership" and the "biblical images of leadership" with practical aspects of "wicked problems" in ministry as relevant in today's multi-cultural teamwork.[25] Yet, as he reviews multiple case studies and at the same time refers to various passages in Scripture, he shows that dealing with "wicked problems" is possible by conducting ourselves as "worthy of the gospel" (Phil 1:27) and adopting that mindset of being "in Christ" as Paul described in the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:5–11. As Lingenfelter points out, to "self-empty for the sake of others" and act "from a position of weakness," we ourselves acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and we are his servants. This is the end of "cultural dominance" and the beginning of unity that wholeheartedly embraces diversity. This is, as Rick Warren pointed out in his closing address at the end of the recent Fourth Lausanne Congress in Seoul, the prerequisite for any true unity that is not to be confused with uniformity. "The only way to have unity is to love diversity."[26] Lingenfelter further completes the picture of this new community in Christ by pointing out that according to Ephesians 4:16, "the role of the ministry leader is not 'head', but rather 'supporting ligament,' and the work is not about the performance of the leader or the body, but about Christ."[27] This is what it takes to move to "mission with", not just at the conceptual level—though it includes that—but also at the very practical level of polycentric mission with participants from many different contexts who go to other even more different contexts.

The starting point is an intentional assumption of a position of meekness and humility "in Christ." It manifests itself by being a servant of Christ, a steward of the sphere assigned, and a shepherd of those one is entrusted to care for. This is "mission with" each other—not just at an artificial level, but increasingly on a deep spiritual level that will move multinational teams beyond cultural dominance and fractions….

The starting point is an intentional assumption of a position of meekness and humility "in Christ." It manifests itself by being a servant of Christ, a steward of the sphere assigned, and a shepherd of those one is entrusted to care for.[28] This is "mission with" each other—not just at an artificial level, but increasingly on a deep spiritual level that will move multinational teams beyond cultural dominance and fractions towards a unity in Christ that is only possible by being transformed into his image. Such "mission with" starts at the doorstep but moves way beyond it by teaming up with those from totally different cultural backgrounds despite the "wicked problems" that will be triggered, moving forward together as new communities in Christ, persevering with him until he completes the task. Such practice of "mission with" enables us to move beyond the cultural dominance of any faction, cultivating cross-cultural teams that display the unity in Christ. Focusing on our "relation in Christ" leads to mutual commitment and shared obedience resulting in the "task of mission" to make disciples not merely remaining a task, but also a "serving and suffering with one another in Christ that … forge[s] teams that … are able to work as multinational teams cross-culturally [so that] God alone brings forth fruit," to use Lingenfelter's words.[29]

Conclusion: Mission with, rather than simply going with the Global South

Under the heading "Going with the Global South," David Mathis writes:

> This amazing trend raises the question for some as to whether the West is done sending missionaries. Will it not now be left to the Global South to finish the mission? The clear answer is no. First, don't discount the power of gospel-advancing partnerships between the West and the Global South. But second, these partnerships should not mean merely sending Western money, but Western people. Going is necessary for discipling.[30]

The call of the hour is to pay attention to the still very different "stages of the work" with regard to discipling the nations. The effort to foster collaboration between local people, near-culture believers, as well as cross-cultural workers from anywhere to work together in humility and love among the least reached is of priority in this context. And while it is a fact that

there are still millions of people who have never had a chance to hear the gospel, there are also new generations of "least reached" emerging in increasingly secularized Western contexts. Yahweh, the triune God, is on a mission and is still calling his servants to peoples and places they never thought of before. Yet these places and people are known to God, regardless of whether they have been neglected by his church. He delights in those willing to serve him wherever he guides them. This increasingly includes believers from the Global South being called to serve among agnostic people in the West and other challenging places. However, as Mathis points out, it still includes believers from the West going to the neglected frontiers elsewhere. Simply leaving the going to the Global South is *not* an option.

In the debate about what should be seen as the priority in missions today, may we not become those who try to discourage what God is still doing—in actually increasing measures as people engage in missions from places that were never "sending contexts" before. Reducing the definition of mission to simply fit our own preferred paradigm might else become one of the latest and worst reductionisms. May we rather engage in the still unfinished task under the guidance of the Lord of the harvest by working in step *with* people who differ greatly from us. If we do, the world will receive a new vision of what God can do to form a coalition from diverse people who are unified in Christ for his glory and the benefit of the world beyond what has been seen so far. As Jay Mātenga says, "the most effective way for us to strengthen participation in God's global purposes is to live according to the kenotic attitude of Christ, which Paul explains most clearly in Philippians 2:5–11."[31] Amen to that! May our work be truly Spirit driven and not simply task driven. Yet let us not presume that the task of mission is already finished but stay engaged and focused as we work with others in multinational teams until the Lord declares the task completed at the end of the age. **MRT**

May we ... engage in the still unfinished task under the guidance of the Lord of the harvest by working in step with people who differ greatly from us. If we do, the world will receive a new vision of what God can do to form a coalition from diverse people who are unified in Christ for his glory and the benefit of the world beyond what has been seen so far.

[1] Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Julie A. Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally: Christ-Centered Solutions for Leading Multinational Teams* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), xvi.

[2] Rick Warren, "Finishing the Task," Biola Missions Conference 2021, Biola University, 29 April 2021. YouTube video, 29:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hr2FxfsM_oI (accessed 25 July 2025).

[3] Paul Bendor-Samuel, "Mission Trends and the Unfinished Task in the Post-Covid Era," keynote address at Lausanne Southeast Asia Regional Forum, online, recorded 21 January 2022, Vimeo video posted 5 May 2022, Wycliffe Global Alliance, 0:22–1:04; 17:21–18:41, 19:16–19:41, https://vimeo.com/706362766 (accessed 30 July 2025).

[4] Paul Bendor-Samuel, "Covid-19, Trends in Global Mission, and Participation in Faithful Witness," *Transformation* 37, no. 4 (2020): 260, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0265378820970225 (accessed 25 July 2025).

[5] Paul Bendor-Samuel, "Mission Trends and the Unfinished Task in the Post-Covid Era," 2:32–3:40; 20:12–20:32.

[6] Paul Bendor-Samuel, "Mission Trends and the Unfinished Task in the Post-Covid Era," 7:14–7:40.

[7] John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 38.

[8] John Piper, "Missions Exists Because Worship Doesn't," Desiring God, 27 October 2012, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/missions-exists-because-worship-doesnt-a-bethlehem-legacy-inherited-and-bequeathed (accessed 25 July 2025).

[9] Andy Smith lists twenty-four specific Old Testament and New Testament episodes in which God commissioned people to work on and complete a specific ministry task. Yet, missions, straddling epochs, is a God task. Andy Smith, "Biblical Language for Vision, Mission, Goals, etc.," unpublished paper, 16 June 2022.

[10] Michael W. Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (London: Apollos, 2017), 385.

[11] Mark Oxbrow, "Book review: Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition," *Transformation* 37, no. 1 (12 January 2020): 83–85, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0265378819894020 (accessed 25 July 2025).

[12] See Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 255.

[13] Paul Bendor-Samuel, "Epilogue: Called to Undivided Witness," in *Undivided Witness: Jesus Followers, Community Development and Least Reached Communities*, ed. David Greenlee, Mark Galpin, and Paul Bendor-Samuel (Oxford: Regnum, 2020), 164–65.

[14] Julie Green in Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 43.

[15] Look for a fuller expansion of these key images in Dave Bremner, *Images of Leadership: Biblical Portraits of Godly Leaders* (George, South Africa: Oasis, 2021) and Sherwood Lingenfelter referring to Dave Bremner in Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 162 onwards.

[16] Paul Bendor-Samuel, "Covid-19, Trends in Global Mission, and Participation in Faithful Witness," 256.

[17] "Paul saw his ministry as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 66… ." Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 305.

[18] Thomas Schirrmacher, "Der Römerbrief wirbt für Mission: Zur Geschichte der ‚Missionsthese' [The Book of Romans as a Charter for World Missions]," *WEA Bulletin* 10 (December 2020): 11, https://www.thomasschirrmacher.net/c-artikel/der-roemerbrief-wirbt-fuer-mission-zur-geschichte-der-missionsthese/ (accessed 25 July 2025).

[19] Schirrmacher, "The Book of Romans as a Charter for World Missions," 34.

[20] The concept of bringing closure to mission was introduced by Ralph D. Winter more than twenty years ago.

[21] Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 6.

[22] In contrast to finding solutions in the context of a default culture in which "elegant solutions" in the sense of an internally coherent response are possible, "wicked problems" go beyond internally coherent approaches and call for "clumsy solutions" that use the skills of any party to pragmatically address these most complex problems. Keith Grint, "Wicked Problems and Clumsy Solutions: The Role of Leadership," *Clinical Leader* 1, no. 2 (2008): 54–68, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281357989_Wicked_problems_and_clumsy_solutions_The_role_of_leadership (accessed 25 July 2025).

[23] Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, *xvii*.

[24] See Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 174.

[25] Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 161–75.

[26] Rick Warren, "Finishing the Task: A Call to Global Mission," Lausanne Movement, 18 October 2024, Youtube video, 11:57, https://lausanne.org/video/finishing-the-task-a-call-to-global-mission (accessed 25 July 2025).

[27] Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 166.

[28] See Dave Bremner, *Images of Leadership*, 13–17.

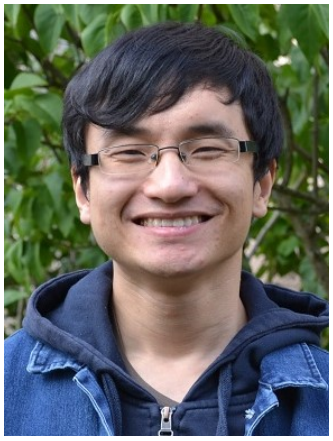
[29] Lingenfelter and Green, *Teamwork Cross-Culturally*, 188.

[30] John Piper and David Mathis, *Finish the Mission: Bringing the Gospel to the Unreached and Unengaged* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 22.

[31] Jay Mātenga: "Polycentric Missions: An Indigenous Engagement," World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, 2024, https://jaymatenga.com/pdfs/MatengaJ_PolycentricEngagement.pdf (accessed 24 July 2025).

The Seoul Statement in the Lausanne Tradition: A First Missiological Analysis

Tianji Ma



Born in mainland China, Tianji Ma (馬天濟) relocated to Germany during his formative years. After completing his university education in science, he received an MTh in Evangelical Theology from FTH Giessen, Germany. Since 2019, Tianji has been an integral part of OMF's Beyond Borders Initiative. He is the inaugural chairman of the Research Foundation for Religion and Culture in Giessen and directs the East Asia Forum within this organization. Tianji is a visiting lecturer at the Lutheran Seminary in Taiwan.

The Lausanne Movement has played a pivotal role in shaping global evangelical mission discourse since its inception in 1974. Each of its four major congresses—Lausanne (1974), Manila (1989), Cape Town (2010), and Seoul (2024)—has produced key statements reflecting the theological and missiological priorities of its time. This article examines the Seoul Statement within the broader trajectory of Lausanne's missional declarations, highlighting its context, structural composition, and theological emphases. By analyzing both its continuity with previous Lausanne statements and areas of discontinuity, the study assesses how the Seoul Statement responds to contemporary challenges in global mission. This exploration contributes to a first understanding of Lausanne's evolving mission theology and its implications for the future of evangelical engagement in a polycentric world.

1. Introduction: The Lausanne Movement and its foundational documents

The Lausanne Movement has played a crucial role in shaping contemporary evangelical mission theology since its inception in 1974.[1] Emerging in response to the ecumenical developments of the mid-twentieth century, Lausanne sought to provide a theologically grounded and missionally driven alternative, fostering collaboration among evangelicals worldwide. Over the decades, its congresses have served as defining moments for global mission discourse, producing key documents that continue to influence evangelical engagement with the world.

The movement traces its origins to the nineteenth century, when evangelical awakenings and the expansion of Protestant missions necessitated new forms of interdenominational cooperation.[2] The founding of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 and subsequent global gatherings, including the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, marked significant milestones in the pursuit of a united evangelical witness.[3] However, tensions between evangelicals and the emerging ecumenical movement became increasingly pronounced,[4] particularly as the World Council of Churches (WCC) inaugurated the International Missionary Council in 1961, shifting its missiological emphasis toward social transformation. In response, leading figures such as Billy Graham and John Stott envisioned an alternative evangelical platform—one that would reaffirm the centrality of evangelization while addressing contemporary socio-political realities.[5] This vision materialized in the First International Congress on World Evangelization, held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in July 1974, bringing together 2,400 delegates from 150 countries.[6]

The Lausanne Covenant (1974), largely shaped by Stott's theological vision, became the foundational document of the movement, articulating a holistic approach to mission that integrated evangelism and social responsibility.[7] This emphasis on a biblically grounded yet contextually relevant mission continued in the Manila Manifesto (1989), which reinforced the need for personal and structural transformation. The Cape Town Commitment (2010) further developed these themes, explicitly addressing the challenges of globalization, secularization, and cultural plurality.[8]

In September 2024, Lausanne marked its fiftieth anniversary with the Fourth Congress on World Evangelization, held in Seoul, South Korea. With 5,300 participants from over 200 countries, the event was described as the most globally representative gathering of evangelical leaders in history. Building on the legacy of previous congresses, the Seoul Statement emerged as the defining document of this new phase, reflecting the Movement's ongoing commitment to a theologically sound and missionally dynamic engagement with the world.

The Seoul Statement must be understood within the broader trajectory of Lausanne Movement's history. To do so, this article will first examine the theological and missiological contours of the three preceding statements—Lausanne, Manila, and Cape Town Statements—before offering a detailed analysis of the Seoul Statement, its historical context, theological structure, and its continuity and discontinuity in relation to the historical trajectory.



Bishop Jack Dain and Billy Graham add the initial signatures to The Lausanne Covenant, 25 July 1974. Courtesy of the Billy Graham Center Archives. Source: Lausanne Movement.

2. Milestones of Lausanne theology: An overview of previous key documents

a. The Lausanne Covenant (1974)

The Lausanne Covenant, structured into fifteen articles, lays the theological and missiological foundation of the Lausanne Movement. A defining feature of the Covenant is its unwavering emphasis on *the authority of Scripture* (Article 2). It affirms the divine inspiration, truthfulness, and authority of both the Old and New Testaments, asserting that Scripture is without error in all that it affirms. The Lausanne Movement, however, accommodates different views on biblical inerrancy, thereby avoiding theological divisions that have hindered other evangelical efforts.

Another central element is the *uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ* (Article 3). The Covenant declares that salvation is found in Christ alone and calls for a clear proclamation of the gospel, rejecting both pluralistic and inclusivist perspectives that might suggest alternative paths to salvation. The necessity of explicit faith in Christ is thus a non-negotiable tenet of Lausanne theology.

The Lausanne Covenant is also notable for its recognition of *the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility* (Article 5). It insists that the church must engage not only in verbal proclamation but also in tangible expressions of Christ's love, addressing issues of justice and poverty. This balanced integration of evangelism and social action has significantly shaped evangelical mission thought.

The Covenant also stresses *the role of the church in mission* (Article 6), underscoring that the local church is at the center of God's cosmic purpose. The phrase "*The whole gospel by the whole church to the whole world*" emerged from this commitment, reflecting Lausanne's vision of global evangelization as a collective and unified effort.

Other key themes include the urgency of the evangelistic task (Article 9), the need for contextualized mission approaches (Article 10) that respect cultural diversity, and the importance of spiritual warfare (Article 12), acknowledging that evangelization occurs in a spiritual battle against the forces of darkness. Additionally, the Covenant affirms the power of the Holy Spirit (Article 14) in mission, emphasizing that evangelism is ineffective without the Spirit's guidance and empowerment. The document concludes with an eschatological outlook (Article 15), affirming that the church's mission takes place in anticipation of Christ's return.

The Lausanne Covenant remains one of the most influential evangelical documents and is widely adopted as a statement of faith by churches, seminaries, and mission organizations. Among its strengths, the document has been praised for its theological depth and quality, its posture of humility and need for repentance, and the contributions of theologians from the Majority World.[9]



Lausanne II panel discussion with Warwick Olsen, Ajith Fernadno, Leighton Ford, and Thomas Wang. Source: Lausanne Movement.

b. The Manila Manifesto (1989)

Fifteen years after the Lausanne Covenant, the Manila Manifesto was drafted to reaffirm and expand upon the original vision of Lausanne. While it does not replace the Covenant, it introduces additional theological and missiological reflections that respond to emerging challenges.

The Manifesto is structured into twenty-one affirmations followed by twelve key articles that reiterate the biblical foundation of mission while deepening the engagement with cultural and social realities.

One of the most significant developments in the Manifesto is *its stronger Christological emphasis* (Affirmation 5). While the Lausanne Covenant affirms Christ's uniqueness, the Manifesto goes further by explicitly stating that "*the Jesus of history is the same as the Christ of glory.*" This affirmation serves as a safeguard against interpretations that might separate the historical Jesus from the theological Christ, a concern that had gained prominence in academic and ecumenical debates during the 1980s.

Another major addition is *the call for deeper societal engagement* (Affirmation 18). The Manifesto urges Christians to invest more time in understanding societal structures, values, and needs as a basis for missionary strategy. This emphasis on sociocultural analysis represents what some scholars call *the cultural turn* in Lausanne theology, marking a shift toward a more holistic and contextually aware approach to mission.[10]

While the Lausanne Covenant already affirmed the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility, the Manila Manifesto *further strengthens the call for justice and human dignity* (Article 5). It explicitly acknowledges the suffering of marginalized and persecuted communities, urging the church to stand in solidarity with the oppressed. This aligns Lausanne's mission theology more closely with global concerns such as human rights, economic inequality, and systemic injustice.

Another key addition in the Manifesto is *its expanded vision of evangelism* (Article 7). It affirms that evangelization must go beyond traditional proclamation methods, recognizing the role of various media, education, and public engagement in spreading the gospel. Additionally, the Manifesto stresses *the importance of cooperation in evangelism* (Article 8), encouraging partnerships between churches, mission agencies, and parachurch organizations.

By reinforcing and expanding the Lausanne Covenant, the Manila Manifesto solidified the Movement's theological core while adapting to the evolving global landscape.

c. The Cape Town Commitment (2010)

The Cape Town Commitment, emerging from the Third Lausanne Congress in 2010, represents the most comprehensive and contemporary expression of Lausanne theology. It integrates insights from the previous documents while addressing pressing challenges facing the global church in the twenty-first century.

The document is structured in *two major parts*:

1. *A theological confession rooted in the love of God*, affirming that Christian mission is ultimately an expression of divine love.

2. *A call to action*, urging believers to engage with the world in ways that embody this love.

One of the most striking aspects of the Cape Town Commitment is its expanded emphasis on *creation care* (II.B,5). While previous documents focused primarily on evangelization and social justice, Cape Town explicitly affirms environmental stewardship as a gospel issue. This reflects a growing evangelical concern for ecological responsibility, recognizing the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on vulnerable communities.

Another new dimension is a *strong critique of prosperity theology* (II.E,5). The document warns against distortions of the gospel that promote materialism and consumerism, reaffirming the biblical call to humility, integrity, and simplicity.

The Commitment also addresses *religious pluralism and secularism* (II.C), recognizing the complexities of mission in an increasingly post-Christian and religiously diverse world. It calls for a renewed emphasis on apologetics and interfaith dialogue while maintaining an uncompromising witness to Christ.

Additionally, the document highlights *the role of suffering and persecution in mission* (II.F), acknowledging that global Christianity is increasingly marked by opposition and hostility. It calls for a theology of resilience, urging believers to stand firm in faith despite challenges.

Finally, the Cape Town Commitment *reframes Lausanne's theological core around the theme of love* (Part I). By structuring the document around the statement "*We love because God first loved us*" *(1 John 4:19)*, it provides a unifying vision that encompasses both theological conviction and missional practice.

When comparing the three key Lausanne documents, a clear trajectory emerges. The Lausanne Covenant (1974) laid the theological and missiological foundation, trying to establish a broad evangelical consensus on mission. The Manila Manifesto (1989) built upon this foundation by incorporating deeper sociocultural awareness and refining Lausanne's theological statements. The Cape Town Commitment (2010) further expanded the framework, integrating new concerns such as environmental stewardship, economic justice, and resilience in the face of persecution. Each document complements rather than replaces its predecessor. This ongoing development reflects Lausanne's



Lausanne III in Cape Town Sunday night closing session. Source: Lausanne Movement.

When comparing the three key Lausanne documents, a clear trajectory emerges. The Lausanne Covenant (1974) laid the theological and missiological foundation, trying to establish a broad evangelical consensus on mission. The Manila Manifesto (1989) built upon this foundation by incorporating deeper sociocultural awareness and refining Lausanne's theological statements. The Cape Town Commitment (2010) further expanded the framework... . This ongoing development reflects Lausanne's dynamic and responsive approach to global mission, demonstrating an enduring commitment to biblical faithfulness and cultural relevance.

dynamic and responsive approach to global mission, demonstrating an enduring commitment to biblical faithfulness and cultural relevance.

Building upon this rich theological heritage, the Seoul Statement emerges as the latest contribution to the Lausanne Movement's evolving mission theology. It reflects both continuity with previous declarations and a response to contemporary global challenges, necessitating a closer examination of its origins, structure, and theological significance.

3. The Seoul Statement: Context, content, and continuity

a. The road to Seoul: Context and controversies

As mentioned above, the Fourth Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization aimed to build upon the rich legacy of its predecessors by addressing contemporary challenges facing the global church. The Seoul Statement commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the Lausanne Movement's dedication to global mission. This pivotal document builds upon the foundational work of the Lausanne Covenant (1974), the Manila Manifesto (1989), and the Cape Town Commitment (2010), addressing contemporary challenges and theological gaps to fortify and refine today's global mission efforts.

Released at the onset of the Congress, the Seoul Statement, a comprehensive 97-point document, serves as both an informative and inspirational tool for the discussions and actions throughout the Congress and the global church.[11] It is designed to be read in conjunction with the "State of the Great Commission" report, ensuring that participants are well-versed in both theological and strategic facets pertinent to the Congress's theme: "Let the church declare and display Christ together."

The Theology Working Group (TWG) initiated the development of the Seoul Statement in 2019, aiming to identify and address biblical and theological gaps not sufficiently covered in previous Lausanne documents. Comprising evangelical leaders from diverse global backgrounds—including Latin America, Scandinavia, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—the TWG sought to produce a biblically grounded and globally relevant document.

However, the process surrounding its formulation and the timing of its release sparked significant controversy among delegates, particularly those from the Majority World. The Seoul Statement was finalized and published on 22 September 2024, the opening day of the Congress, leaving no opportunity for delegates to influence its content.[12] This unilateral approach was perceived by many as undemocratic and dismissive of the participatory ethos that had characterized previous Lausanne gatherings. In many ways, history seems to have repeated itself in the introduction of the Seoul Statement. Much like in Cape Town 2010, the document had at best an indirect connection to the actual theological work of the Congress. Reflecting on the Cape Town Commitment, VolkerGäckle observed: "The fact that it was neither drafted, received, discussed, nor adopted during the Congress does not contribute to giving this document particular weight."[13] Unfortunately, the same could be said about the Seoul Statement.

Delegates from the Majority World, in particular, expressed frustration over the lack of consultation, feeling that their perspectives and contextual realities were inadequately represented. The leadership of the Congress explained that the pre-conference finalization of the statement was (only) intended to inform and inspire participants' deliberations throughout the event. However, this rationale did little to assuage concerns, as many felt that the approach undermined the collaborative spirit essential for genuine global partnership in evangelization efforts (keyword: collaboration). In response to participant feedback, the organizers have now invited attendees to submit their suggestions and feedback on the "Seoul Statement" to foster a more inclusive and collaborative dialogue.[14]

The tensions were further exacerbated by a plenary address delivered by Dr. Ruth Padilla DeBorst, the daughter of the theologian René Padilla, on 23 September 2024, focusing on the theme of justice. Drawing from her extensive experience as a theologian and advocate for social justice in Latin America, Dr. Padilla DeBorst highlighted various examples of global injustice, including racial wealth disparities in the United States, the exploitation and abuse of women, environmental degradation resulting from the Global North's waste disposal in the Global South, and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Her explicit mention of Israel's military actions in Gaza was particularly polarizing, leading to discomfort and offense among some delegates. Critics argued that her remarks presented a one-sided perspective, lacking nuance and failing to acknowledge the complexities of the situation. In response to the backlash, the Congress leadership issued an official apology, expressing regret for any offense caused by the address. The apology, however, ignited further debate. Some delegates appreciated the conciliatory gesture, while others viewed it as a capitulation that stifled prophetic voices calling the church to confront

uncomfortable truths about systemic injustices. The incident underscored the delicate balance the Lausanne Movement must navigate in addressing contentious global issues without alienating segments of its diverse constituency.

... the Lausanne Movement must continually strive to bridge these perspectives, fostering a mission theology that authentically reflects the multifaceted nature of the gospel in diverse cultural contexts.

The controversies surrounding the Seoul Statement and Dr. Padilla DeBorst's address echo historical tensions within the Lausanne Movement. At the first Lausanne Congress in 1974, theologian René Padilla delivered a groundbreaking critique that challenged the evangelical community to embrace a holistic understanding of mission—one that integrates both proclamation and social responsibility. His address led to the formulation of an alternative *Lausanne Covenant*, reflecting a broader vision of evangelization.[15] His speech was called "the speech that shook the world."[16] Despite the passage of five decades, the movement continues to grapple with the interplay between evangelistic proclamation and the embodiment of the gospel through social action. The Seoul Congress highlighted that while progress has been made, divergent emphases persist. Organizers prioritized evangelism, whereas many delegates from the Majority World advocated for a more integrated approach that equally values social justice and transformation. This ongoing discourse suggests that the Lausanne Movement must continually strive to bridge these perspectives, fostering a mission theology that authentically reflects the multifaceted nature of the gospel in diverse cultural contexts.

The events at the Seoul Congress serve as a poignant reminder of the challenges inherent in leading a global evangelical movement. The formulation and dissemination of guiding documents like the Seoul Statement require a delicate balance between providing clear theological direction and honoring the diverse voices within the global church. Ensuring participatory processes that genuinely engage representatives from all regions is crucial for fostering a sense of ownership and unity. Moreover, addressing complex social and political issues necessitates a thoughtful and nuanced approach, one that acknowledges differing perspectives while remaining rooted in biblical convictions. As the Lausanne Movement moves forward, embracing these challenges with humility and openness will be essential in fulfilling its mission to declare and display Christ together.

b. The architecture of the Seoul Statement: Structure and core themes

The Seoul Statement is structured around seven primary themes, each of which corresponds to a key area of contemporary theological and missional engagement. The document is arranged systematically, with each theme divided into numbered sections to facilitate clarity and ease of reference. This structural approach allows readers to engage with the document in a way that is both comprehensive and accessible, making it an effective resource for theological reflection and practical application. The first theme, *The Gospel: The Story We Live and Tell*, reaffirms the foundational role of the gospel in Christian identity and mission. Unlike a purely doctrinal exposition, this section presents the gospel as a narrative, tracing its arc from creation through the fall of humanity, the covenant with Abraham, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, and the anticipation of his return. The emphasis on the gospel as a lived reality underscores the necessity of both proclamation and demonstration, highlighting the church's responsibility to embody the message it proclaims.

The second theme, *The Bible: The Holy Scriptures We Read and Obey*, asserts the centrality of Scripture as God's inspired and authoritative word. It calls for renewed commitment to diligent and faithful engagement with the Bible, emphasizing the need for responsible interpretation that is attentive to historical, literary, and canonical contexts. The document acknowledges that biblical interpretation does not occur in a vacuum but is shaped by cultural and historical perspectives. While affirming the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, the Seoul Statement also recognizes the value of the interpretive tradition of the church, which has provided continuity of faithful reading throughout Christian history. By encouraging local churches



Lausanne 2024 opening night. Photo by Gjermund Oystese. Source: Lausanne Movement.



At Lausanne 2024. Photo by MaryChris Lajom. Source: Lausanne Movement.

to prioritize public reading of Scripture and communal reflection, the document underscores the formative power of the Bible in shaping Christian discipleship.

Building on these theological foundations, the third theme, *The Church: The People of God We Love and Build Up*, addresses the nature and mission of the church. This section responds to contemporary challenges such as increasing disillusionment with institutional Christianity and the fragmentation of Christian communities. The Statement reaffirms the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic body and calls for a renewed understanding of its role as the community through which God's redemptive work is made visible in the world. The document highlights the importance of corporate worship, the sacraments, and spiritual formation in sustaining the life of the church, while also emphasizing that Christian faith is not an individualistic pursuit but a communal reality. It critiques forms of church that distort the values of Christ and his gospel, cautioning against the rise of consumer-driven, entertainment-based ecclesial models that risk undermining the church's authentic witness.

The fourth theme, *The Human Person: The Image of God Created and Restored*, engages directly with contemporary debates on human identity. In contrast to previous Lausanne documents, which focused primarily on social justice and economic inequality, the Seoul Statement gives extensive attention to anthropological and ethical concerns. It affirms the biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God, an identity that confers inherent dignity and value on every individual. The document addresses controversial issues such as gender, sexuality, and bioethics, providing a robust theological framework for engaging with these debates. It emphasizes that human identity is not self-defined but given by God, and it critiques modern cultural ideologies that seek to redefine fundamental aspects of human nature. While maintaining a firm commitment to biblical orthodoxy, the Statement also calls for pastoral sensitivity and compassionate engagement with those who struggle with issues of identity and belonging.

The Seoul Statement highlights the growing crisis of integrity among Christian leaders and communities, pointing to numerous cases of financial misconduct, sexual abuse, and power struggles that have damaged the credibility of evangelical witness. It calls for a renewed commitment to personal and corporate holiness, arguing that ethical failures within the church hinder the effectiveness of its mission.

The discussion of human identity naturally leads into the fifth theme, *Discipleship: Our Calling to Holiness and Mission*, which examines what it means to be a follower of Christ in an age of moral and ethical complexity. The Seoul Statement highlights the growing crisis of integrity among Christian leaders and communities, pointing to numerous cases of financial misconduct, sexual abuse, and power struggles that have damaged the credibility of evangelical witness. It calls for a renewed commitment to personal and corporate holiness, arguing that ethical failures within the church hinder the effectiveness of its mission. True discipleship, the Statement argues, is not merely intellectual assent to doctrinal truths but a transformative process that involves obedience to Christ in every aspect of life. The section also underscores the inseparability of discipleship and mission, asserting that those who follow Jesus are called not only to personal spiritual growth but also to active participation in the Great Commission.

One of the most pressing concerns addressed in the Seoul Statement is the reality of global conflict, which forms the focus of the sixth theme, *The Family of Nations: The Peoples in Conflicts We See and Serve for Peace*. This section builds upon the Cape Town Commitment's emphasis on reconciliation and justice but moves further in addressing issues of nationalism, ethnocentrism, and political polarization. The document laments the ways in which nationalism has been conflated with Christian identity in various parts of the world, warning that such distortions undermine the church's universal mission. It calls for Christians to engage actively in peacemaking efforts, not by aligning with partisan political agendas but by embodying the reconciling love of Christ. The Statement urges the church to stand in solidarity with persecuted communities, to advocate for justice in contexts of systemic oppression, and to resist ideologies that seek to divide humanity along ethnic or national lines.

The final theme, *Technology: The Accelerating Innovation We Discern and Steward*, represents a significant development in Lausanne's mission theology. Unlike previous statements, which focused primarily on social and cultural issues, the Seoul Statement gives considerable attention to the ethical implications of technological

advancements. The document acknowledges both the opportunities and the dangers posed by digital technology, artificial intelligence, and biotechnology, cautioning against the ways in which these innovations can reshape human identity and relationships. It calls for discernment in the use of technology, urging Christians to engage in thoughtful reflection on how technological progress aligns with biblical principles. The Statement also highlights the role of digital media in shaping worldviews, warning that Christians must resist being discipled by secular ideologies propagated through online platforms. Instead, the church is called to leverage technology for the advancement of the gospel while maintaining a critical posture that prioritizes human dignity and ethical responsibility.

c. Continuity and discontinuity: The Seoul Statement in Lausanne's legacy

The Seoul Statement must be understood in the light of its declared purpose: it does not attempt to be comprehensive, nor does it seek to reiterate the theological themes already addressed in previous Lausanne documents. Instead, it deliberately builds upon the Lausanne Covenant, the Manila Manifesto, and the Cape Town Commitment, complementing them rather than supplanting them. To fully grasp its significance, it must be read alongside the State of the Great Commission report, which provides a broader strategic assessment of contemporary global mission. Nevertheless, the mentioned tensions that have marked Lausanne for the past fifty years—most notably the balance between proclamation (prioritized by the Congress organizers) and the lived demonstration of the gospel (emphasized by many Majority World representatives)—remain unresolved. While previous Lausanne leaders such as John Stott and Christopher Wright sought a mediating position, the younger generation of leaders appears to struggle with maintaining this delicate equilibrium. Consequently, reactions from the Majority World were not long in coming.

A certain ambiguity in communication also characterizes the Seoul Statement. The introductory article describes "evangelism" and "discipleship and pastoral care" as the twin responsibilities of the global church, while in the preamble, these elements are framed as equally significant priorities. Later, paragraph 35 speaks of the two pillars of faithful belief and practice—orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In previous Lausanne documents, the focus was often on two primary missional imperatives: proclamation and social responsibility, including the pursuit of justice. Here, the messaging appears less precise.

This raises the overarching question of how mission is understood. Much has been written about the debate in 1974 over the nature of mission, as well as the holistic vision that has since shaped Lausanne. While these historical discussions need not be reiterated, it is striking that the concept of mission continues to expand. Whereas the Cape Town Commitment incorporated themes such as environmental stewardship (I.7.A), child welfare (II.D.5), and opposition to domestic violence (II.E.3.C), the Seoul Statement further broadens the scope to include issues of human identity—particularly sexual orientation (Section IV), war and peace (Section VI), and the opportunities and risks posed by technological advancements (Section VII). There is no doubt that these issues are of great relevance in today's world. However, they are primarily ethical rather than missional concerns. Their prominence in a mission statement suggests an ongoing shift toward a missiology that not only proclaims the gospel but also seeks to shape the world, at least in part, according to God's vision for humanity.

The Seoul Statement deliberately builds upon the Lausanne Covenant, the Manila Manifesto, and the Cape Town Commitment, complementing them rather than supplanting them. To fully grasp its significance, it must be read alongside the State of the Great Commission report, which provides a broader strategic assessment of contemporary global mission.

This growing emphasis on ethics within Lausanne is not without precedent. After the Cape Town Congress, Michael Herbst expressed discomfort with the increasing emphasis ethics is given in a mission theology coming from the Lausanne movement.[17] The concern is not that ethical engagement is unwarranted, but rather that mission risks becoming so broadly defined that its evangelistic core is overshadowed. Christopher Wright, writing in *The Mission of God*, argues that nearly every human need can be seen as a starting point for mission. However, all such engagement must ultimately lead to the point where individuals encounter Christ, are called to repentance, and invited into faith and obedience.[18] The broader Lausanne's mission mandate becomes and the more extensively it speaks on societal issues, the clearer it must also articulate its primary commitment to evangelism.

Yet, for all the shifts and expansions in focus, Lausanne's core identity as a movement committed to proclaiming the gospel remains intact. If anything, the common thread uniting Lausanne participants across theological and cultural divides is precisely this shared urgency to make Christ known to all people. This evangelical focus remains deeply embedded within the Seoul Statement. While some have criticized the document for not taking explicit positions on various socio-ethical and political issues, this restraint may in fact be one of its strengths. Unlike the Cape Town Commitment, which was widely seen as shifting Lausanne from theological to ethical concerns, the Seoul Statement resists the temptation to comment on every global crisis. Without neglecting essential ethical dimensions, in my view, it avoids overextending its mandate by positioning itself as a response to every social, ecological, and political challenge. In this sense, the Seoul Statement could be seen as a welcome return to Lausanne's theological and missional priorities, and it would be desirable for it to remain largely unchanged in its current form.

From the outset, the document makes it clear that the global church's varied

The Seoul Statement highlights a pressing challenge for the global church—the lack of effective discipleship for new believers. The preamble laments that many churches have struggled to nurture the faith of millions of first-generation Christians ...

challenges can only be addressed through a renewed commitment to the centrality of the gospel and the faithful reading of Scripture. This emphasis on the *gospel as the story we live and tell* (Section I) underscores the belief that the identity of the evangelical movement is fundamentally rooted in being a people of the gospel. The Statement makes a strong and explicit reference to Christ's atoning work (I.12: he died as our representative), affirming that the gospel is not primarily an ethical directive but a *theological proclamation* of what God has accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection (I.12-13). From a missiological perspective, this focus reinforces a central Lausanne principle—vital and transformative church and mission movements emerge where the gospel serves as the very DNA of the Christian life, shaping both local congregations and missionary endeavors.

The Seoul Statement also renews an emphasis on the authority of Scripture. In contrast to the Cape Town Commitment, which notably omitted the term "inerrancy", the Seoul Statement reintroduces this language, affirming that Scripture is "authoritative, unerring, set-apart" (II.18). This marks a return to the Lausanne Covenant's high view of Scripture, asserting that the denial of biblical authority ultimately weakens the church's missional effectiveness. The Statement explicitly calls on local churches and missions to devote themselves to the public reading of Scripture and to form faithful Bible readers and listeners, as individuals, groups, and worshiping communities (II.24). This commitment to Scripture reinforces the conviction that churches most effectively bear witness to Christ when they are deeply rooted in the word of God.

The Seoul Statement highlights a pressing challenge for the global church—the lack of effective discipleship for new believers. The preamble laments that many churches have struggled to nurture the faith of millions of first-generation Christians, acknowledging, "*We regret that during the last 50 years of evangelistic harvest, the global church has not adequately provided the teaching necessary to help new believers develop a truly biblical worldview*" (Preamble). This concern underpins an entire section, *Discipleship: Our Calling to Holiness and Mission* (V), which seeks to address what it describes as *spiritual anemia and immaturity* in evangelical churches. For Lausanne's mission to be fully realized, discipleship must remain inseparable from evangelism. The Statement reinforces that a biblically faithful mission must cultivate not only orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right action) but also orthokardia—a rightly ordered heart (IV.35). At a time when church affiliation is increasingly seen as optional, the Statement strongly reaffirms the role of the local church in forming disciples, declaring, "*Local churches play a vital role in our formation as disciples …*" (V.75).

Beyond its strong theological and missional focus, the Seoul Statement offers nuanced reflections on anthropology, sexual ethics (IV), and the ethical challenges of technological innovation (VII). One of its most significant contributions, however, is its heightened emphasis on ecclesiology, an area that has been somewhat underdeveloped in previous Lausanne documents. Acknowledging this gap, the Statement calls for deeper ecclesiological reflection:

> *[H]ow we imagine the church matters greatly. We recognize that the doctrine of the church has received little attention during these decades of extraordinary Christian expansion in the world, and there is little consensus about what the church is, its importance in the life of the Christian, and its relevance to our world (IV).*

While Lausanne is not expected to formulate a fully developed ecclesiology, this renewed focus on the church's nature and mission is, from my view, a welcome development. The Statement affirms the church's dual calling—both as a missionary contact society (IV.43-47) and a counter-cultural contrast society (IV.33-35). Crucially, it warns that the greatest threat to the church is not external opposition but internal compromise that undermines the integrity of its message.

Finally, the Statement directs attention to the challenges of the digital age, recognizing that the emergence of digital spaces has provided Christian believers yet another means to come together, prompting ongoing theological reflection on the nature and form of the local church (IV.41). While Lausanne has often embraced technological opportunities for mission, the theological task ahead will require careful discernment of both the potential and the limitations of digital formats. In this respect, the Seoul Statement marks a crucial step in Lausanne's ongoing theological reflection and missional engagement in an increasingly complex world.

Conclusion

The Seoul Statement stands as both a continuation of Lausanne's theological tradition and a response to new challenges facing the global church. While it consciously builds upon the Lausanne Covenant, the Manila Manifesto, and the Cape Town Commitment, it does not seek to replicate them. Instead, it highlights areas that require renewed theological and missiological reflection. One of its key contributions is its reaffirmation of the centrality of the gospel and the authority of Scripture, emphasizing that the mission of the church is rooted in God's redemptive work rather than ethical activism.

At the same time, the document reflects an ongoing tension within the Movement regarding the relationship between proclamation and social engagement. Its broadened scope, which includes human identity, global conflict, and technology, signals a shift toward a more expansive vision of mission, one that seeks not only to proclaim the gospel but also to shape societies in accordance with biblical principles. This shift has been met with both affirmation and concern, as some fear it may dilute Lausanne's historical commitment to evangelism.

Nevertheless, the Seoul Statement's strength lies in its theological clarity—particularly its renewed emphasis on discipleship, ecclesiology, and the role of

the church. It resists the temptation to speak into every social and political issue and avoids the equation of mission with ethics that some perceived to have come from *The Cape Town Commitment*. Instead, it calls the church to deep theological formation while recognizing the pressing realities of the contemporary world.

As the Lausanne Movement moves forward, the Seoul Statement invites the global church into a continued conversation on mission, holding together evangelistic urgency and cultural engagement. If it succeeds in maintaining this balance, it will serve as both a faithful expression of the Movement's past and a guiding framework for its future. **MRT**

---

[1] A concise historical summary of the Lausanne Movement is provided, for example, by Hannes Wiher, "50 Years of the Lausanne Movement," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 48, no. 3 (2024).

[2] For a detailed description, see Rose Dowsett, "The Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Alliance," in *The Lausanne Movement: A Range of Perspectives*, ed. Margunn Serigstad Dahle, Lars Dahle, and Knud Jørgensen, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series 22 (Oxford: Regnum, 2014), 399-410, https://www.ocms.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The_Lausanne_Movement-Final-WMF.pdf (accessed 6 June 2025).

[3] See in particular the following relevant literature: W. Harold Fuller, *People of the Mandate: The Story of the World Evangelical Fellowship*, Outreach and Identity Series (Carlisle: Pasternoster and Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Ian M. Randall and David Hilborn, *One Body in Christ: The History and Significance of the Evangelical Alliance* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001); Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, Studies in the History of Christian Missions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

[4] It is worth noting that no evangelical mission was represented in the process that led to the establishment of the IMC. According to Matthey, this absence marked the first rupture between evangelicals and ecumenists in the twentieth century. See Jacques Matthey, "Édimbourg 1910 et Son Approche de La Relation Entre Mission et Unité," *Histoire et Missions Chrétiennes* 13 (2010): 89. Consider also David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now* (Oxford: Regnum, 2009), 237–61; Klaus Fiedler, "Edinburgh 2010 and the Evangelicals," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34, no. 4 (2010): 332–34.

[5] See Billy Graham, "Why Lausanne?," in Peter Beyerhause and International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne), *Alle Welt Soll Sein Wort Hören: Lausanner Kongress Für Weltevangelisation 1974* (Hänssler: Neuhausen-Stuttgart, 1974).

[6] Graham, "Why Lausanne?," 35–38.

[7] Cf. Pavel Černý, "Editorial 2: John Stott (1921-2011) - Radical Disciple of Christ: On the Centenary of His Birth and the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," *European Journal of Theology* 30, no. 1 (2021).

[8] All official documents of the Lausanne Movement can be found at https://www.lausanne.org and will not be cited separately in the following discussion: Lausanne Movement, "The Lausanne Covenant," https://lausanne.org/statement/lausanne-covenant; Lausanne Movement, "The Manila Manifesto,", https://lausanne.org/statement/the-manila-manifesto; Lausanne Movement, "The Cape Town Commitment," https://lausanne.org/statement/ctcommitment; Lausanne Movement, "The Seoul Statement," https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement. Additionally, the proceedings of Lausanne consultations are documented in the so-called Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOP), https://lausanne.org/occasional-papers (all accessed 6 June 2025).

[9] Christopher Wright, for instance, highly values the Lausanne Covenant, recognizing its role in shaping a comprehensive understanding of mission. He highlights how it underscores both the parallel importance of proclaiming the gospel and social action, the necessity of culturally sensitive mission training, and its reflection of the integral dimension of biblical teaching, ultimately uniting evangelicals around shared convictions and faith in mission. Christopher Wright, "Loving God, Serving the World," *Christianity Today* 9 (October 2010): 15, cited from Wiher, "50 Years of the Lausanne Movement," 202.

[10] See, for example, Friedemann Walldorf, "Der 'Cultural Turn' und der Aufbruch der Evangelikalen Missionswissenschaft in den USA in den 1960er bis 1980er Jahren: Historische und Theologische Perspektiven," *European Journal of Theology* 25, no. 1 (2016).

[11] The self-understanding of the Seoul Statement is articulated primarily in an introductory article on the Lausanne Movement's website: Michael Oh, David Bennett, and Ivor Poobalan, "Introducing the Seoul Statement," Lausanne Movement, last modified 22 September 2024, https://lausanne.org/about/blog/introducing-the-seoul-statement (accessed 6 June 2025).

[12] Parallel zu 2010: Im Blick auf die Kapstadt-Verpflichtung hat Volker Gäckle formuliert: „Die Nichterarbeitung, Nichtaufnahme, Nichtdiskussion und Nichtverabschiedung während des Kongresses tragen nicht dazu bei, diesem Dokument ein besonderes Gewicht zu geben. „17 Ähnliches wäre in dieser Hinsicht (leider) über das SST zu sagen.

[13] Volker Gäckle, "Die Kapstadt-Verpflichtung: Eine kritische Würdigung," in Winterhoff; Herbst; Harder, *Von Lausanne Nach Kapstadt: Der Dritte Kongress Für Weltevangelisation*, 209.

[14] According to current information, a revision remains a possibility, though no specific plans have been announced at this time.

[15] See, for example, Henning Wrogemann, *Missionstheologien Der Gegenwart: Globale Entwicklungen, Kontextuelle Profile Und Ökumenische Herausforderungen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2013), 130–38; Hannes Wiher, *Holistic Mission: An Historical and Theological Study of Its Development, 1966-2011*, WEA World of Theology Series 25 (Bonn: VKW, 2022), 26–28; Samuel Escobar, "Evangelisation Und Die Suche Des Menschen Nach Freiheit, Gerechtigkeit Und Erfüllung," in Beyerhaus, Alle Welt Soll Sein Wort Hören: Lausanner Kongress Für Weltevangelisation 1974; C. R. Padilla, "Evangelisation Und Die Welt," in Beyerhause, *Alle Welt Soll Sein Wort Hören*.

[16] Lausanne Movement, "The Late René Padilla and the Speech that Shook the World," 28 Apr 2021, https://lausanne.org/best-of-lausanne/the-late-rene-padilla-and-the-speech-that-shook-the-world (accessed 10 June 2025).

[17] Michael Herbst, "Von Lausanne nach Kapstadt: Der 3. Kongress für Weltevangelisation in Kapstadt 2010 im Kontext der "Lausanner" Geschichte und Theologie," in Winterhoff; Herbst; Harder, *Von Lausanne Nach Kapstadt: Der Dritte Kongress Für Weltevangelisation*, 37. See also Gäckle, "Die Kapstadt-Verpflichtung: Eine kritische Würdigung," 222–23.

[18] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 319.



With God through the Crisis

Patrick Wolf. London: Novum, 2024. ISBN 9781642683554 (e-book). 281pp. German edition: Mit Gott durch die Krise. ISBN 9783991468073 (e-book), ISBN 9783991468066 (print). 282pp.

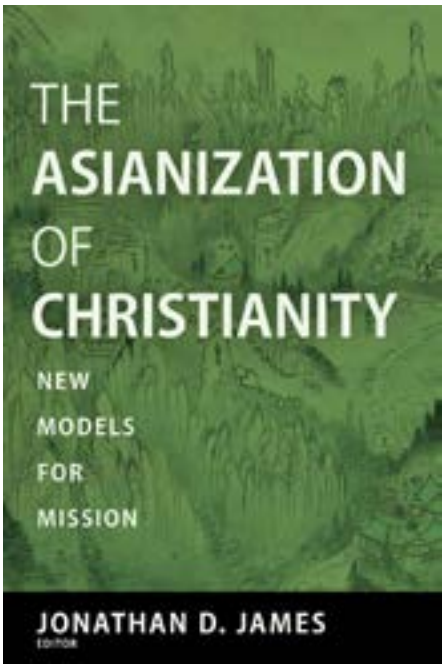
After a very brief opening about his life up to early 2020, Wolf recounts an encounter with God during the COVID pandemic that turned his life around 180 degrees. From living in the world according to the ways of the world, God became the center of his life. How did Jesus become his best friend? How did he discover that Jesus desires to have an intimate relationship with us? Wolf recounts his faith journey with Jesus that freed him from addictions, allowed him to experience healing from illnesses, and enabled him to use his various gifts to serve God.

This book was written for Christians as well as those who do not yet know God. The stories told here testify to the ways in which God completely changed the author's life and how he can change the lives of others as well.

The Asianization of Christianity: New Models for Mission

Edited by Jonathan D. James. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2024. ISBN 9781506494661. 355pp.

Reviewed by Nathan Keller



Beginning with William Carey's arrival in India in 1793, the modern mission movement was greatly used by God to bring the life-changing message of the gospel from the West to the Asian continent, where it has taken root in the lives of generations of Asian disciples of Jesus Christ.

Honestly reflecting on the spread of the gospel into Asia, Jonathan D. James boldly writes, "I have formed the opinion that the expansion and establishment of Christianity in Asia has been too Eurocentric" (1). He then seeks to "introduce and then define the term 'Asianization' as a possible corrective in the church's missionary outreach" (1).

This book is divided into three separate sections, with each chapter written by a different Asian theologian. Section One (chapters 1–4) explores the theological constructs that inform the topics of contextualization and indigenization. Section Two (chapters 5–12) is a collection of case studies and useful information related to evangelism and church planting in selected Asian contexts. Section Three (chapters 13–17) explores how training and discipleship occur in various Asian settings.

In the concluding chapter, James proposes a new model of mission. This model delineates the five rubrics of people, principles, structures, scope, and praxis. In this concluding chapter, James lays this out in a simple table that compares this new model to the old one (341).

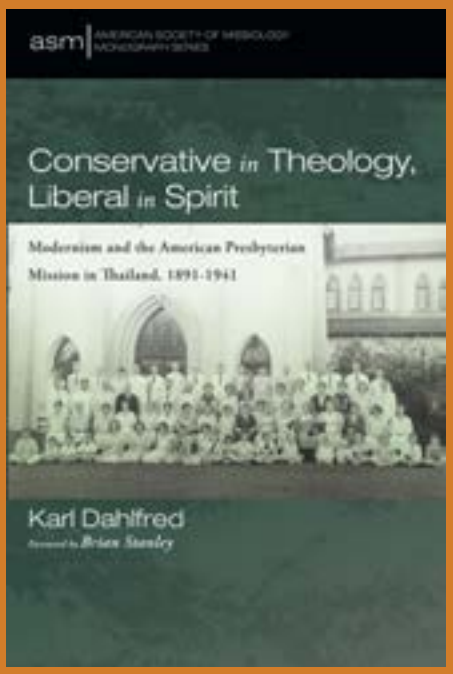
One strength of this book is the numerous and varied case studies and illustrations taken from a vast number of Asian contexts. Ministry contexts explored include Myanmar, Nepal, India, Indonesia, Thailand, China, Singapore, The Philippines, and other countries in Southeast Asia. In reading through these chapters, one gets a good sample of what God has been doing to establish his church and make disciples of Jesus in this culturally and religiously diverse and vast area.

Another strength of this book is the variety of contributors, all fourteen of whom are themselves Asian. They understand the complexities of the ministry contexts in which they grew up and where they now serve. Each one has a different writing style, a feature that invites the reader to listen carefully to what and how each cultural insider conveys his or her intended message.

Another strength is the honest, yet critical reflection that the contributors give regarding the complex history of mission work in Asia. The spread of the gospel often happened at the same time as colonial expansion, a reality that brought many unhelpful practices to Christian mission. The authors directly engage with this issue and help us evaluate this and move toward more healthy mission practices.

One natural limitation to a one-volume work titled *The Asianization of Christianity* is that not every Asian context is represented. Both the regions of West Asia and North Asia of the continent are not focused on at all, with the exception of notes about mission history and general statements about religious groups. Church leaders and missionaries working in these regions of Asia might be drawn to the book by its title, learn about other contexts, but then be discouraged by the unmet expectation of wanting to learn something about their own ministry context.

In the concluding chapter, James reinforces his purpose for editing this book. He writes, "the call to Asianization is a call for loving, respectful, contextualized expressions within the diversity of Asia's cultures so that the gospel is understood" (339). As reflective practitioners of mission, this purpose should be ours as well, along with the added focus of helping people in our ministry contexts to live lives that are transformed by the gospel in a way that witnesses faithfully to others. It is for this reason that I strongly recommend reading this book, reflecting on its contents, and humbly asking the Lord to help us communicate the gospel in a way that stimulates understanding and obedience in those who are becoming disciples of Jesus.



Conservative in Theology, Liberal in Spirit:

Modernism and the American Presbyterian Mission in Thailand, 1891–1941

American Society of Missiology Monograph Series 69

By Karl Dahlfred. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2024. ISBN 978-1666755565. 298pp.

Reviewed by Walter McConnell

Karl Dahlfred's book, *Conservative in Theology, Liberal in Spirit*, should be read by many reflective practitioners of mission. I say this for three reasons. First, it examines an aspect of mission history that few modern missionaries understand though they should. The fundamentalist-modernist controversy that substantially impacted church life and mission practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has never really gone away. This book addresses the issue by considering how and in what ways American Presbyterian missionaries serving in Thailand were impacted by the divergent theological understandings prevalent at the time. Though the American Presbyterian Church along with the church in China would split from the collision of orthodox and modernist understandings of Scripture, the Thai church stands out for not following suit. Missionaries in Thailand and elsewhere can learn much here about why this happened and gain a sound footing for thinking through similar disagreements in church doctrine and practice.

Second, the book shows that mission work done in the past two centuries, by both orthodox and liberal workers, has frequently aimed to help countries and cultures become more modern or civilized. Dahlfred rightly asserts that this goal produces nebulous ends because definitions of "modern" are extremely subjective. He also demonstrates that, from the nineteenth century onwards, the Thai elites chose those elements from the West (and elsewhere) they believed could help modernization and rejected those that didn't. Their almost universal rejection of Western religion serves as a warning to anyone who desires to see a society come to Christ through "modernization" or "development" beginning from the top down. Many evangelical readers will be surprised to find that arguments they now use to promote social ministries closely parallel their "modernist" counterparts of a century ago. As some missionaries to Thailand from the period noted, schools, hospitals, and other means of social uplift can be evangelistic, but only when they are used evangelistically.

Third, the book's careful and sympathetic assessment of the beliefs of various missionaries should halt (or at least slow down) our making blanket statements about a person's theological, political, or other beliefs without warrant. Where they remain silent, we should remain silent. As the author states: "Sometimes it is possible to uncover a connection between a missionary's theological convictions and his actions. Sometimes it is not. Not all smoke is evidence of fire, and ambiguity in the historical record must be acknowledged as theological leanings are considered as one of multiple factors in missionary thinking and actions" (187). The same is true today. Some of our missional decisions are based on our theological convictions, but many aren't. Acknowledging this truth could help reduce tensions between and within mission agencies.

Despite these positive reasons for delving into the book, many readers will not find it an easy read. In part, this is because the study began as a PhD thesis and the issues addressed are not well known. This should not, however, be seen as a deterrent, as these are ideas that missionaries should get to know. Readers may find the book to be quite repetitive, as the chapters examine a limited number of ideas and practices from different angles.

Who then should read it? Christians in Thailand will discover a slice of their history to be found nowhere else. Evangelical missionaries engaging in educational and service ministries will gain new perspectives on the relationship between their work and evangelism and discipleship. Mission leaders will find that the response of earlier leaders to historical issues will give them insight as they face new or similar issues today. My hope is that many will read this book, reflect upon what it says, and seek to work it out in their setting.

Paperback copies can be ordered from Kanok Bannasan (OMF Publishers Thailand) for 700 Thai baht. https://eng.kanokbannasan.org/product/conservative-in-theology-liberal-in-spirit-modernism-and-the-american-presbyterian-mission-in-thailand-1891-1941/