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Mission Round Table

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Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness

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Cover:

The cover photographs show different ways in which OMF workers have shared the gospel in East Asia since the 1950s.

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Editorial

Walter McConnell

Some five years ago OMF leadership made a decision to reformulate our mission statement with the goal "*not* to change or review our mission but to in order to better express it and explain it." And whether we read the old statement that proclaimed the Fellowship exists "To glorify God by the urgent evangelization of East Asia's millions" or the new one that declares "We share the good news of Jesus Christ in all its fullness with East Asia's peoples to the glory of God," the center is the revelation of God's glory through the proclamation of the gospel.

The connection between God's glory and the preaching of the gospel is significant. God is glorified as the gospel is preached and as it is believed. For this reason, it is essential that we know what the gospel is, how it is good news for people today, and how it can be rightly shared in our context. During the first week of June 2019, OMF held its sixth Mission Research Consultation on the theme "Sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in All its Fullness" and discussed how it impacts our ministry. Four of the major papers from the Consultation form the bulk of this issue of *Mission Round Tabl*e, each one pushing our understanding of the gospel in a slightly different direction.

In the first article, "Dialoguing and Decentring in the Search for the Full Gospel in Local Contexts," Paul Woods presses us to move from simply thinking that the point of the gospel is to seek conversions to developing a desire to see it shape worldviews, social mores, and ethno-cultural practices through in-depth discipleship. In other words, we need to help local theologians develop local theologies that will engage local questions and philosophical understandings. What are we willing to do toward that end?

Jean-Georges Gantenbein's article, "Good News in a World of Aesthetics," demonstrates that aesthetics challenges Christians in our contextual relationship with an aesthetics-dominated society that is image-orientated and experience-driven, in our formulation of a theology that will make sense in this world while remaining faithful to Scripture, and in our practice of being the church. As he shows, the missiological implications of living in this world are so great that we need to invest in deep thought to understand our situation and develop persuasive means of engaging our culture—particularly in its devotion to the artistic image—that will display the gospel message in all its beauty and ethical fullness.

Gantenbein's call to thinking and engagement is picked up by David Eastwood who applies these ideas to his own interaction with people while growing up in England and working in Taiwan. His reflection on these concepts in the light of artistic and architectural aesthetics in traditional Chinese culture calls us to consider how the gospel speaks into what is considered "beautiful" and "good" in the minds of the people with whom we work.

Next, Peter Rowan examines the liberating power of the gospel, particularly as it relates to people with disabilities. He encourages us to adopt Jesus' agenda as laid out by Luke who shows that the liberating message of the gospel is first preached in peripheral places, integrates the teaching of the whole Bible, and creates communities of transformation based in the church. Disabled people impacted by this gospel gain *dignity*, *new life* in Christ, *participation* in the gospel and church, *advocacy* as the church speaks up for them, and *agency* as channels of transformation and healing.

Rowan's ideas are personalized by Jonathan Yi-Deh Yao who describes his own experience in "Living with Disability by His Grace." Knowing that Jesus journeys with him in his disability helps Yao in day-to-day life and as he accompanies and ministers to people with different disabilities. He understands ministry to the disabled as cross-cultural in that we must transcend personal barriers to embrace others as we come to understand that in God's sight we are all disabled by sin and in need of his love and salvation.

The importance of speaking to people in their cultural context is addressed in Andy Smith's examination of the way the gospel answers the ardent longings Filipino folk Catholics have for blessing. By examining the way his preunderstandings interfaced with the ideas of those with whom he worked, Smith helps us see the importance of cultural exegesis of oneself and one's target culture so that the gospel can be presented in an understandable manner. His narrative approach is biblically-based, flexible, and reminds the audience of their need to become part of a larger story. Can it be adapted to the needs and desire of the people with whom you work?

In "Sharing the Gospel as a Blessing in Taiwan," Nathan Keller describes ways in which Smith's approach can be applied to his own ministry situation where people also desire to be blessed. But whether people seek blessing or something else, gospel messengers need to understand their cultural context, identify things that are highly valued, and make use of them in their gospel presentations. He rightly reminds us that although blessing is a biblical theme, it is closely linked with suffering for the person who follows Jesus.

Our final article supplies a model for delivering a first-person, narrative talk based upon a biblical text. Assuming the persona of a witness to the healing of the lame beggar by Peter and John, Brian Powell considers all of the people present and asks, "How would they react?" The response of the population at large, the Jewish religious leaders, and the apostles and other disciples, may be echoed by different people today when their faith is challenged and compels us to contemplate how we would react. Spiritual and homiletical training unite in a simple form.

We hope that this issue of *Mission Round Table* gives you plenty to think about and good examples for practice as you share the good news of Jesus Christ in your context.

Dialoguing and Decentring in the Search for the Full Gospel in Local Contexts

Paul Woods



Paul Woods works at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies as a research tutor with particular focus on East Asia. Previously, he taught theology and mission at Singapore Bible College. He has served in Chinese Diaspora ministry, as linguistic consultant at the OMF International Centre, and as language and culture advisor for the Mekong Field. His current research interest is contemporary East and Southeast Asian fiction as a means of understanding the contexts in which mission is done.

Introduction

Christian mission is the business of taking the message of God as recorded in the Scriptures and embedding this within individuals, peoples, and cultures in accordance with his redemptive purposes. On the orientation course we were given a helpful clarification of the difference between evangelism and evangelisation, the latter term featuring in OMF's mission statement. Many churches and denominations around the world, and many of the great faith missions and their descendants are better at evangelism than evangelisation. We are better at converting people than discipling them, and in many situations discipleship needs to go beyond traditional ideas of prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance. In that sense, the gospel delivered to those new to the faith can often be reductionist or truncated.

Recently, evangelicalism has confessed that more needs to be done to reveal and release the gospel in all its fullness in specific contexts. Practitioners and theoreticians around the world continue to work to improve the Christianisation of peoples and cultures, the critical engagement of the gospel with existing worldviews, social mores, and ethno-cultural practices.

This paper draws on ideas of dialogue[1] and decentring in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin[2] and the nomadic theory of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari[3] to advocate a fuller local theology in context. Before exploring their work it is necessary to consider different ways in which both the gospel as delivered to us and our understanding are unavoidably limited.

The limitation of the gospel and our understanding of it

This paper espouses a broad and rounded idea of the gospel rather than one which understands God's redemptive purposes as focused on the individual soul and views human civilisation as evil and destined for destruction. Recent scholarship by Chris Wright[4] and Tom Wright[5] among others has commended a holistic and critically engaged gospel to us, which adopts a full *creation-fall-redemption-restoration* paradigm rather than a simple *fall-redemption* one.

Consideration of sections of the Old Testament, many New Testament Epistles, and the dual theological lenses of the partially inaugurated kingdom of God and the eschatological vision of Revelation suggests that the message of Scripture is underspecified.[6] In literary theory and linguistics, "underspecification" means that a given utterance or written text can never contain all of the information required to understand the message being transmitted. The reader or listener has to fill in gaps and make inferences from knowledge that he or she already has in a mediated dialogue between the author and the reader. There is a reader response as well as an authorial intent. For some, "reader response" suggests respect for the reader's intelligence and an acknowledgement of the work of the Holy Spirit. Others may associate the term with an undermining of authorial intent and a slide towards individualist, postmodern interpretation. Regardless of our responses to "reader response", it and indeed underspecification are realities.

I believe that another kind of underspecification occurs in N. T. Wright's "five-act play" model, but at the conceptual level.[7] Wright is one of several authors who discuss God's revelation and the associated responsibility of the church in terms of the acts of a play. The Scriptures contain four completed acts: creation, fall, Israel, and Jesus. We are also given the first scene of the fifth act, corresponding to the church and the Revelation given to John. Wright

claims that we now live in the second part of the fifth act and know what has gone before because we can refer to the script. The book of Revelation gives us a sketchy idea of how the play will end. We do not have a script for the life of the church now; there are no lines to recite or stage directions. However, the authority of God, the record of the Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit enable us to work out how to be Christian in the here and now.[8]

A further limitation comes from the finite context in which the Scriptures were given. The OT exhibits strong embodiment in an Israelite/Jewish culture which evolved significantly between the patriarchs and the Minor Prophets. The NT contains four Gospels written for Jews and Gentiles and a body of teaching material which negotiated the different and sometimes contradictory cultural expectations of Christians from Hellenised Jewish and Greek backgrounds under imperial Roman domination. The gospel deposit that we have received is limited in space and time.

Finally, there is our own embodiment. Missionaries and Christian workers come to their ministries as products of their personal experience, ethnic/national culture, and theological training. Scripture is a joint divine-human project, but theology and missiology are much more human. As we bring the gospel to other cultures, we may overlook our own embodiedness and consequent need to question our understanding of it.

From the perspective of literary theory or biblical theology, the basic underspecification of the gospel means that we are not given detailed instructions on how to be Christian. Bringing into juxtaposition the fundamental embodiedness of the gospel message in first-century Palestine and the eastern Mediterranean and our own limited perspectives and experience reveals a depiction of the gospel which is not exhaustive. Some like to describe Scripture as a blueprint for living, but that is rather simplistic. In his wisdom and trust in his human servants, God has given us powerful principles and compelling stories as well as brains and experience to apply the gospel deposit from the past into the present.

Orientation to local theologies

With this in mind, contextualisation and local theologies are vital if we are to see the emergence of the full gospel in a particular context. We can consider enculturation, contextualisation, and local theologies as partially overlapping endeavours. Enculturation concerns the embedding of the gospel in a traditional cultural framework, while contextualisation[9] requires us to take account of contemporary socio-political issues as well. These related efforts were originally seen as the responsibility of foreign missionaries in a cross-cultural context. The growth of the worldwide church and partnership between missionaries, mission organisations, local churches, and local believers now demand "local theologies" crafted and applied by indigenous Christians. These may be developed with the assistance or advice of outsiders, especially if a young church lacks theological resources and expertise.

Song Minho contributed to the idea of local theologies in his 2006 paper on contextualisation and discipleship, identifying local factors which might inhibit progress in discipleship in Asia.[10] He sought to move away from "off the peg" solutions imported from the West and allow the context to speak, in order to respond to local issues. Song's intelligent engagement with context was a huge advance, yet his aim of equipping local Christians to resist the corrosive effects of society could be described as "coping", which evokes the metaphor of a shield.

To move towards a fuller implementation of the gospel, in the spirit of Ephesians 6:10–17, mission must consider the sword as a complement to the shield; we need to encourage active, transformational engagement with society. We can put a little flesh on the bones by looking briefly at a short section of Revelation 21. In verses 22–27 we read about the presence of God in the city. To this centre of holiness the kings of the earth will bring their splendour and glory (Rev 21:24–25). Yet, because of the glory of God and the holiness of the city, nothing evil or deceitful will be able to enter it. These twin themes of divine holiness and human splendour suggest a redemptive filtration of multiple areas of human existence and endeavour by God and his people. In this era of already-but-not-



Contextualization and Discipleship: Closing the gap between Theory and Practice – Song Minho

https://dev.omf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/MRT-1.2-April-2005-Globalization.pdf

Song Minho offers healthy critique against uncontextualized discipleship programs being exported to Asia. He argues that context-sensitive approaches in discipling Asian believers should deal with local problems such as corruption, fear of spirits, and poverty.

The Rise of Global Theologies – Andrew Walls

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnlt1EJFju8

Listen to this introductory lecture on the rise of global theologies given by Andrew Walls at the 2011 Wheaton Theology Conference on the theme "Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective" held at Wheaton College in April 2011.



yet, we can build on the threefold typology for interacting with human cultures derived by Chris Wright in his study of Old Testament ethics.[11] He claims that as God's people advanced into new territory they encountered values compatible with God's (such as family and respect for older people), behaviours totally unacceptable to a holy God who created humanity in his image (such as child sacrifice), and customs to be monitored and gradually weeded out (such as polygamy). The specifics here are from Wright, but the applicability of the principles to any cultural and political context should be clear enough.

Finally, Schreiter tells us that local theologies are constructed when the gospel is adopted and adapted into a given context, beginning with "the needs of the local community"[12] and providing responses to difficulties local believers face. The results of such an endeavour could look a little different from theologies inherited from the West. Indeed, he claims that the local theologies that have emerged so far feel like the wisdom tradition of the early church period; there is something earthy and connected about this body of knowledge.[13] Local instantiations of theology are more the work of local people than of academic theologians. The latter are important, but must act to serve the local people. He reminds us that local theologies draw from multiple sources and advocates a continuous dialogue between "gospel, church, and culture."[14]

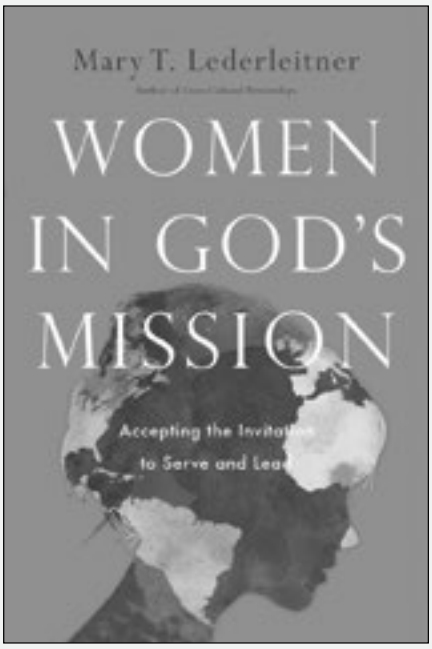
Constructing local theologies requires engaging with the "totality of the culture" and cannot remain only on the intellectual or rational level. If outsiders or theologically trained locals are involved, they must respect the identity of local believers as Christians in their own right and their freedom to look and feel different from Christians in other countries or even other valleys, at the same time as they hold on to core truths. Culture is not fixed and thus local theology is aimed at a moving target. Also, the balance between the particular and the universal is unlikely to be perfect.

So far, this paper has considered the fundamental underspecification of the gospel and the need to bring our limited understanding of it into dialogue with culture in the broadest sense. In addition, local theologies require a dialogue with and between people embedded in their own culture and the intentional removal of "experts" to the margins. Themes similar to these appear in the work of the Russian thinker Bakhtin and the French duo of Deleuze and Guattari.

Fellow wanderers: Deleuze, Guattari, and Braidotti

Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) was a philosopher and his associate Felix Guattari (1930–1992) was a psychoanalyst and activist. Together they wrote a number of books, the most relevant of which to this paper is *A Thousand Plateaus*.[15] If a single motif had to be identified for their work, it would be continuity; their philosophical approach rejects simple dualism and definition and always looks for integration, continuity, and movement. Rosi Braidotti (1954–) is an Australian feminist philosopher of Italian descent, who has developed the nomadic theory of Deleuze and Guattari and brought it into dialogue with contemporary issues.

The concept of nomadism does not concern itinerant herders in Mongolia; it is a way of looking at and reflecting upon the world. The basic idea is that all must become nomadic in their identities and thought. All three scholars critique the Cartesian dualisms at the heart of Western thought. Braidotti's "embodied subject" reunites the affective and the rational; heart and mind need not exist in dichotomy. The same notion requires us to think about individuals and communities in terms of their rootedness in traditional and contemporary culture, gender



Women in God's Mission: Accepting the Invitation to Serve and Lead

By Mary T. Lederleitner. Downers Grove: IVP, 2018.
ISBN 978-0-8308-4551-4. 240pp.

Reviewed by Eunice Au

In this book, the author shares research she has gathered from personal interviews of women from approximately thirty nations. Each was selected because they were respected by colleagues and were able to serve and lead with excellence and integrity in God's mission. Lederleitner brings the voices of these women to the dialogue about leadership in God's mission without the stridency of a doctrinal debate about the role of women in leadership. She simply recognizes these women who have accepted God's invitation to serve and lead and brings their perspectives into the conversation.

The book includes chapters on appreciating these women's stories, exploring the influence of a faithful, connected leader, acknowledging the realities of gender discrimination, and considering what women need to do their best work. She concludes by focusing on what this research could mean for the future. For readers who would like to pursue these areas further, the book includes research details and methodology, end notes, and a bibliography.

I found this book a compelling read that lay people will find easy to digest as it is organized into logical and helpful sections. I appreciate the honest discussion on the challenges of gender discrimination that refuses to blame or accuse others. My favorite part was a short and meaningful chapter on the role that husbands who act like Jesus play in helping married women do their best work.

frameworks, intergenerational dynamics, and interpersonal relationships.[16] We cannot consider any person or group divorced from their context, *in vacuo*, so to speak. It is probably fair to say that until recently Western thought in general and evangelical mission in particular have paid insufficient attention to the embodiment of individuals and communities. The phrase "one size fits all" comes to mind. The creative tension between the particular and the universal advocated by nomadic theory can help us navigate the nuances and complexities inherent in local contexts and theologies.

Dialogue with people means interacting with those who belong in a given context, identifying with its culture, and fitting into its social structure. While Braidotti likes to talk about the "lived experience" of embodied subjects,[17] Charles Taylor speaks of "embodied agents."[18] Respecting the agency of people different from ourselves means being willing to take risks and honour their heritage as we accept that their journey of theological development may not be the same as our own.

Deleuze and Guattari are critical of the Enlightenment need for definition, preferring to see the world in terms of processes and continua. A central notion in nomadic theory is that of *becoming*, Deleuze and Guattari emphasising change rather than stasis. For them, any given *status quo* can only be the temporary outcome of a process and will soon be modified by the forces acting upon it. That which can be measured and defined is only a snapshot, a frame, of an unfolding drama. There are clear resonances here with various kinds of underspecification and reader response.

As people who questioned the political order from a neo-Marxist perspective, Deleuze and Guattari paid a great deal of attention to the margins. For them, too much Western history and ideology have been defined by and centred on privileged white males, and it is time to hear the voices of those at the edge. To make sense of and improve our human existence, everybody—highly privileged and less privileged, both genders, indeed all represented by the simple binaries that we have for so long taken for granted—must go to the margins and begin again. This aspect of their programme evokes the gospel inclusivity of Galatians 3:28 and Hiebert's fourth self—self-theologising.[19]

The radical decentring of nomadism allows us to look at ourselves, our mission partners, and indeed the whole world through new eyes, as we become free to question our assumptions about everything around us. Such radical repositioning and decentring interrogate and, in some cases, even disassemble existing ideologies, structures, and power relationships and advocate *becoming*. Deleuze and Guattari and Braidotti discuss *becoming-woman*, *becoming-machine*, and *becoming-insect*.[20] There is no *becoming-man* because this would represent a move to the centre which would strengthen privilege and division.

Braidotti insists that all embodied subjects must undergo becoming, whether we are at the centre or the margins.[21] *Becoming-woman* has two aspects. Negatively, the process involves apprehending the unfairness of the relationship between the genders, including power asymmetries, the objectification of the female body in culture and business, and stereotypical views of women. Positively, we are to appreciate and learn from what the feminine stands for. This cannot be a one-size-fits-all journey, as *becoming-woman* may feel very different for those at the centre compared with those at the margins.

Becoming-machine is derived from the relationship between people and machines. Although "machine" is not a new metaphor for some human activities, the apparently all-encompassing scope of technology is making aspects of modern life machine-like. We are dependent on and interfaced with all manner of sophisticated technology. Computer technology, transport, and logistics seem to be reducing differences between men and women. Mass production and distribution emphasise the interchangeability of parts, including people. Individual distinctives can get in the way of efficient service and delivery of goods. A monotonous similarity does at least guarantee that we will enjoy our cup of coffee or fast-food meal the same way every time, regardless of who made it or how and where it was made. Our question about our bank account, gas bill, or air ticket might be answered by Bill in Birmingham or Bavesh in Bangalore, whose flawless adherence to the correct protocols means that we get what we need. The machine idea warns us against simplistic adoption of one-size-fits-all approaches to thinking and being. We are reminded here that the individual and his or her needs are sacrificed for the sake of production or efficiency, and that systems are all too often imposed from outside.

The third form, *becoming-insect*, is possibly the hardest to identify with, although there is some overlap with *becoming-machine*. Thinking about insects reminds us that we share our very existence with the "other". Their appearance, size, colour, and modes of movement make them alien and we may view them with loathing and even fear. They often appear to us in groups or even hordes, their dark, shiny exoskeletons resembling the uniforms of soldiers from another realm. Insects represent the fear of the other, different and threatening in their plural numbers, and incapable of even the most basic communication with us. There are reminders here about essentialisation and the othering of other cultures and faiths. More positively, we know that social insects have sophisticated modes of communication, organisation, and labour.

Another central concept of nomadic theory is the rhizome—flat, non-hierarchical structures which grow horizontally and cover large expanses of territory. Mould and mushrooms are rhizomes. Although they grow from a point, after a period of time it can be hard to determine where the original centre was. They are always becoming, and here is the relevance to Deleuze and Guattari's rejection of stasis and embracing of dynamism. Rhizomes are flexible and non-hierarchical and in nomadic theory represent the opposite of the hierarchical tree-like structures which dominate Western thought and organisational paradigms. Although Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as without central organisation,[22] I believe that the matter is not quite so simple. A rhizome, whether mould or mushroom, is defined by its DNA; there is an essential mouldiness about mould and mushroomness about mushrooms and they behave in a certain way because that is what they are. On the macro level, rhizomes exemplify the absence of hierarchy and discernible structure, but on the micro level they grow and function according to in-built instructions and procedures.

The final element of nomadic theory relevant to this paper is the "line of flight".[23] In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the

nomadic idea of *lignes de fuite* allows us to dislocate from or escape a given situation and do something new. In a previous paper on nomadic theory and mission, I back-translate from the English *flight* to French *vol* rather than *fuite*, tentatively adding a sense.[24] I argue that moving from centre to periphery and taking account of a person's circumstances defines a trajectory. When a cannon is fired, the trajectory of the shell is defined by the height of the cannon, the angle of the barrel, and the power of the charge. Thus, the creative decentring of Deleuze and Guattari involves not only a dislocation or escape, but also a flight envelope associated with the initial conditions.

In dialogue with Bakhtin

The Russian Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) wrote a number of works on philosophy and literary theory in the early Soviet period, many of which were only made known to Western readers after the 1970s. Under his "being-as-event",[25] existence is always ongoing and moving. Also, "events of being" always involve relationships between oneself and others and are experienced together rather than merely thought of.[26] Bakhtin emphasises the event and insists that excessive abstraction or theoretisation results in impoverished understanding because the findings or conclusions are divorced from the event and its context. This feeds into his notion of embodiment, which is informed by the principle of the incarnation in Orthodox theology.[27]

Renfrew argues that the idea of "fluid and dynamic" relationships is central to Bakhtin's thought.[28] Indeed, Bakhtin's understanding of the relation between self and other was founded on embodied subjects in time and space which interact with each other, a philosophical orientation which later developed into his dialogism.

From his scholarship on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin derives his concepts of finalisation and unfinalisability. Finalisation is related to the attempt to theorise and fully define a being or entity and stands in opposition to unfinalisability, which seeks to understand and also preserve the openness and liveliness of an entity or a concept. The unfinalisable is unclosed and indeterminate[29] and events are unfinished.[30] There is a clear connection to underspecification.

In the same study, Bakhtin developed the idea of multiple voices within the novel, the so-called polyphony which he connected strongly with the idea of dialogue.[31] The idea of dialogue was subsequently extended in Bakhtin's thought as he came to believe that it is present in all human interactions. His colleague Voloshinov went on to suggest that monologue or individual thought was, in fact, a fiction.[32] The emphasis on dialogue and the principle that people and entities are always mutually interacting is congruent with unfinalisability. No concept, entity, or human interaction is ever really finished or finalised; there is always more to say and further to go.

Moving forward with the philosophers

It is time to apply Bakhtin and Deleuze and Guattari to local theologising to see how we can move towards a full gospel in local contexts. I do not accept nomadic theory uncritically, and in invoking the idea of the rhizome in particular I am not advocating chaos or the evisceration of the gospel. I am simply hoping that the two bodies of philosophy can help us engage carefully in dialogue in order to see a full gospel emerge.

Both Bakhtin and nomadic theory recognise the tentative nature of thought and theorising, and that conclusions are always interim and open to question. Both emphasise the importance of listening to people in their embodiedness, as complex mixtures of the rational and the emotional, and as individuals within community. Deleuze and Guattari ask us to deconstruct hierarchy and take ourselves to the margins. Nomadic theory gives us an attitudinal posture and asks us to learn from and together with the people among whom we hope to see a flourishing, culturally relevant, and culturally critical instantiation of the body of Christ, founded on principles from both testaments and living these out in a specific time, space, and culture.

As outsiders (often missionaries from Western or westernised countries using Western or westernised methodologies) bring the gospel into a particular situation, they will encounter the "other"—people and groups different from themselves. Part of the missionary task is to understand and negotiate that otherness. But this is only half of the story; if we are serious about interacting with local people to whom we bring the gospel or with whom we work to extend the gospel, then we must understand that they too are negotiating otherness. Those yet to come to faith will be very different from missionaries and even local Christians will almost certainly be dissimilar to their foreign brothers and sisters in Christ. Local believers also have to negotiate their own otherness and differences vis-à-vis the majority indigenous population.

Within this context then, it is essential to engage in respectful, decentred dialogue, and recognise that it is ongoing, as Bakhtin said. The contexts in which local theologies are developed suggest a number of separate but overlapping dialogues.

If we accept that the bare bones of the gospel as laid out in a Hellenised eastern Mediterranean cultural and political milieu are underspecified, and if we agree that context comprises not only "traditional" culture, but also contemporary social and political forces and factors, then the interaction between gospel and culture is of supreme importance. The original teaching on God's purposes for his people was given to Hebrews and subsequently to "Greeks", and thus always involves a hermeneutical exercise, because much biblical content, including the most didactic of the New Testament letters, feels foreign to us. We don't seal deals by exchanging sandals, we (in the West at least) don't worry about food that has been offered to idols, and we are not overly concerned about Old Testament law. Scripture is "culturally conditioned".[33] Good theologising builds bridges between God's authoritative word and contextual issues; an example is Paul's wrestling with the issue of food sacrificed to idols in Corinth. As Walls says: "a Hellenistic way of following Jesus is under construction."[34] He discusses how theology is created during the mission enterprise as the gospel crosses borders and has to deal with new challenges. For him, this theological construction is a result of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), whose requirements are quite underspecified indeed.

With all of this in mind, Bakhtin's dialogism helps us think about how

teaching about God's righteousness, the individual, the community, social justice, and morality collide with the situation in a given location. From the other side, how does a deeper and more rounded understanding of the context help us revisit our theology and understanding of Scripture and demand more from our inherently limited understanding? This is precisely Paul's experience as he dealt with the idol question.

Nomadic theory's *becoming* and concept of the rhizome are helpful here. In the extraordinary *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that any state of affairs is only a temporary bringing together of factors and influences in a stream of action and development. We must think of our understanding of the gospel in such terms: it is our personal derivation, based on the thinking and writing of others, integrating philosophy, culture, history, and theology. Our embryonic or even well-informed apprehension of a local ministry context is also a snapshot. Going forward, my dual interpretation of lines of flight suggests that our integrated understanding of both develops along broad trajectories. Rhizomes have no centre, beginning, nor end. They are slabs of activity, expanding wherever they can in a non-hierarchical way, but according to shared DNA. Can we think of our understanding of what the gospel is and might be in analogous terms? Do we have the courage to think of our theological and missiological systems as just one part of a kingdom splurge that God is creating around the world? Are we willing to think of ourselves as not central, our gospel understanding no more important than one developing in some majority world urban sprawl or rural context?

Moving to another kind of dialogue, there are few completely unchurched parts of the world today. Wherever we undertake mission we will find some believers, and foreign missionaries entering a given context will usually encounter and interact with the local church to some degree. Local believers may be few in number and lack theological understanding. They may be under intense persecution. They may have sold out to nominalism and worldliness. They may be zealous for what we might feel is an unhealthy fundamentalism. Nonetheless, there must be a dialogue between outsider and insider.

If we assume, although in this day and age this might not be justified, that missionaries are better trained and more theologically astute than local Christians, then the foreigners have something to offer to the local believers. The locals definitely have a deeper understanding of their own context and culture than the outsiders, although dialogue of this kind will always benefit from both emit and etic perspectives, as Bakhtin and Deleuze and Guattari would agree. Local and foreign Christians must dialogue to see how the gospel can survive, grow into, and transform life in a given situation; this is the combination of the shield and the sword. Nomadic *becoming* challenges us. Foreign missionaries and local church leaders often have power and influence, which put them at the centre, which Braidotti characterises as male. Yet, if there is going to be genuine dialogue then all need to move to the margins and adopt the attitude of the powerless, a stance analogous to the *kenosis* of Christian theology. This would protect the emerging local fullness of the gospel from unhealthy hierarchical power

William Shellabear: A Biography

By Robert A. Hunt. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1996.
ISBN 978-9679940923. 373 pp.
Reviewed by Ka-Neng Au



Hunt's biography brings to life a complex and brilliant Englishman who started his professional career in the military (posted by the Corps of Royal Engineers to Singapore to oversee the development of its harbor defences), then in ministry (missionary and mission leader in the Singapore District of the Methodist Church) and business (founder of the Methodist Publishing House in Singapore, and later an owner and manager of a rubber plantation in Malaya), and finally as a renowned scholar and teacher of the Malay and Arabic languages as well as Islam.

In Shellabear's lifetime (1870 to 1947), Christian attitudes towards Muslims and Islam evolved from strident animosity to some measure of understanding. Shellabear was influenced by some of the leading scholars of the time, from Samuel Zwemer to Duncan Black MacDonald who taught Muslim Theology at the Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut.

Shellabear established his own legacy in Christian-Muslim relations, beginning with his friendship and language studies with Malay religious teachers in Singapore and Malaya. He translated literary and classical works from Malay to English, as well as the entire Bible into Malay. He wrote commentaries on the Gospels and many evangelistic tracts for a Malay-speaking audience, and promoted (unsuccessfully) the recommendation that the Malay language be used as the medium of instruction in Methodist Church Mission-run primary schools in the region. Due to ill health, Shellabear eventually left his ministry in Southeast Asia to teach in the United States, first at Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey, and later at the Kennedy School of Mission at Hartford Theological Seminary.

Hunt draws from many documents in the (British and Foreign) Bible Society's archives at Cambridge University, the United Methodist Archives at Drew University, as well as the national archives of Singapore and Malaysia. This biography was originally written in partial fulfillment for a PhD at the University of Malaya and is thus quite an academic piece of writing. Even so, Hunt weaves in interesting anecdotes and other details of interactions with family and friends that have been captured in personal letters to and from Shellabear. The reader is left marveling at Shellabear's energy and wide scholarly pursuits, and at his farsightedness in appreciating and valuing the use of the Malay language.

dynamics, the corrosive individualism often associated with the West, and the stultifying conformism of some parts of the East.

We never take the gospel into a philosophical or religious vacuum. If the centre of the mission endeavour is the preaching of the gospel and the conversion of the lost, then as well as addressing people's fundamental spiritual needs as identified in Christian Scripture, we must also appreciate their perceived or felt needs. We need to understand their systems of morality, justice, and social interaction, which may collide and even conflict with the gospel. More positively, centuries of Christian mission to Asia have shown us that there is much in the beliefs and religions of the region that merits respect and from which we can learn. We know that people do not simply bend the knee to Christ when they first hear about him; conversion is often a long and complex process of deconstruction and reconstruction of beliefs. Dialogue between Christians and non-Christians should play a vital role in developing a full gospel in context.

The idea of embodied subject is common to Bakhtin and nomadic theory and requires us to look at people as individuals within community and embody ourselves together with them; in mission terms, this is a form of incarnational ministry. We cannot avoid considering culture, history, gender, social class, and local concerns and issues as they relate to ordinary human lives in context. This embodiment of the gospel places us into a tension between the universal and the particular; Bakhtin and nomadic thought require us to think and be glocal. What would the New Testament have looked like if Paul had gone east rather than west? The local issues faced and the dialogue partners encountered would have given rise to letters to the churches in Bokhara, Samarkand, or Bishkek quite different from the missives to the Corinthians, Thessalonians, and Romans.

Bakhtin reminds us that the dialogue is more about becoming than being. Our work to identify, develop, or dig out a full gospel from context and theology is always going to be tentative and hopefully asymptotic. God knows where and how our developmental line on the graph meets the axis; we do not, and we must work in faith.

For this reason we must be bold enough to embrace Bakhtin's unfinalisability. Societies are always changing and so is our understanding of the gospel. Bakhtin helps us to accept this lack of closure and sets us free from the need to define. Scripture depicts a process of development through the Old Testament and into the New; we cannot stand still. Part of the tragedy of the Pharisees was that they could not escape the shackles of finalisation and failed to grasp that Jesus was developing the gospel along a trajectory which lay inchoate in the Old Testament. Paul's critics made a similar mistake when he went beyond the bounds of Judaism in his ministry.

In dialogue with Bakhtin

This article has introduced the notion of the underspecification of the gospel in various aspects and followed this with a summary of relevant and helpful ideas from the Russian Bakhtin and the Frenchmen Deleuze and Guattari. Ideas of becoming, moving away from definitions, decentring, dialogue rhizomes, and the embodied subject can help us deal with God-ordained underspecification and equip and motivate us to discover a fuller gospel in a particular ministry context.

The paper is designed to advocate a theoretical position and has dealt with the various philosophical notions in general terms. Also, time and space do not allow specific applications to context. That said, I believe that the approaches of Bakhtin and Deleuze and Guattari may fit better philosophically with the worldviews of non-Western people as an agenda for local theologising, probably having more in common with East Asian thought than Cartesian dualism and the Enlightenment need for certainty.

I hope that this introductory work can be followed up by further discussion and an eventual application to ministry contexts in East Asia. **MRT**

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[22] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21.
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[25] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (Austin: University of Texas, 1993), 12.
[26] Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy*, 18.
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[29] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota), 53.
[30] Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy*, 32–33; Renfrew, *Bakhtin*, 37.
[31] Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 18, 40.
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The Good News in a World of Aesthetics

Jean-Georges Gantenbein



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Introduction[1]

Aesthetics, as the "science of beauty," works on defining its object in contrast to "ugliness." Specifically, it questions the meaning of art. While it only became a discipline of philosophy in the eighteenth century, some ideas in this field were being explored earlier. For example, Plato's philosophy of ontological aesthetics which was based on the "beauty" of the idea, Aristotle's concept of the transformative effect of drama on emotion, and Plotin's identification of the total being with the idea of "the beautiful."

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) was the first to coin the term "aesthetics" which he considered to be the science of sensible knowledge. However, his attempt to create a space for "the beautiful" was influenced by classical rationalism—art must copy nature. Paradoxically, Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804) gave aesthetics its status within and then outside philosophy. For him, aesthetics was a *philosophia prima*, i.e., its most essential element. At the same time, his understanding enabled him to remove it eventually from his philosophical approach.

The German philosophical movement which formed aesthetic notions corresponds to the poetic movement (Winckelmann, Klopstock, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller). The synthesis of both currents in the early nineteenth century was the origin of German idealism's metaphysical aesthetics. Since then, different scientific disciplines have been applied to the science of "sensible knowledge." However, Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844–1900) nihilism marked the end of the unity between the "beautiful" and the "good." Scholars still find reaching a consensus on the theory of aesthetics to be a major challenge.[2]

My definition of aesthetics comprises a broad understanding that includes all present-day forms of art, experiences, image, music, feelings, and many other subjects of the aesthetically sensible.

Christians and missionaries face three challenges in a world of aesthetics as they live in modern urban societies around the world:

Context. Aesthetics increasingly dominates the context of our society—the flood of images, the enhancement of feelings, the experience-driven society, self-staging, communication, marketing, social media, and, above all, virtual space are keywords that well describe the increasing aestheticization of our society.

Theology. Protestant and evangelical Christians are poorly equipped for this new context because they think and act from a theology that emphasizes the word of God. This theological tradition, which in the time of the Reformation led to iconoclastic excesses, stands in high tension with aesthetics. In this tradition, the "word," the Holy Scripture, plays a critical function with regard to the image.

Church. The strongest growth within the universal church is experienced currently in the "aesthetic" wing of Christianity—the Pentecostal, charismatic, and neo-charismatic part of the universal church. I call it "aesthetic" because in these movements the experience, the feelings, and the extraordinary are often brought to the foreground.

Now, an evangelical theological "workshop" has to face the aestheticization of society and of the worldwide church with few resources and instruments to meet these opportunities and challenges.

Context. In this fast-moving, dazzling context we first need a "beautiful"

theology and then, above all, a theological aesthetic. The first concerns the language, structure, and appearance of this science; the second is rooted in God's beautiful being. Many churches, young people, and artists try to adapt worship services, church activities, and evangelistic methods to the aesthetic expressions of our time. Even so, very little theological reflection on an attractive theology is evident, not to mention consideration of God's beauty.[3] Much of what does exist remains a loan from present-day fashions. Some of it is useful; some only an imitation.

Theology. During the Reformation, Protestant theology produced various approaches to the image. Prohibition of images in the Decalogue was interpreted in a distinctively biblical way. Thus, fine and performing arts were seen as legitimately representing God within the frame of God's commandment. A positive correlation between the image and the word of God, however, is often still lacking. While Catholic, liberal Protestant theology, and process theology think about a theology of culture, evangelical theologians tend to avoid the topic. This deficiency in evangelical thinking needs to be addressed.

Church. The growth of the aesthetic part of the universal church affects all continents. For some observers, this expression of faith is a successful, although unplanned, contextualization of the aesthetic practices of our society. Others fear that this is only another step, a pre-stage of secularization, an uncritical contextualization that will collapse after a period of growth. Theologians face the real challenge of a renewed ecclesiology that can respond to this "charismatization" and save the church from a "liquidation" of her message and herself.[4]

Thus, we are challenged by a theology of aesthetics in an era which defines itself by four "post-times." We live in an age that is post-secular, post-Christian, postmodern, and post-factual. In this context—whether in Western industrialized societies or in developing countries—aesthetics is such a dominant feature that we can hardly avoid it. It is present in our community and our churches. Therefore, it is up to evangelical theologians to face this reality and enter into a challenging dialogue that will help us to make full use of these possibilities.

Because of the growing predominance of aesthetics in our societies, I propose a theology of balanced aesthetics. A theology of the word preserves the aesthetics from its isolation and implosion and links it to a more solid foundation—the word of God.

1. A theology of aesthetics

Part of the biblical and part of the Christian tradition—especially in Protestant-Reformed circles—have always opposed the domination of aesthetics, viewing it as opposing the word of God or leading almost inevitably to idolatry. I will first review this theological critique of aesthetics and then develop a biblical theology of aesthetics.

1.1. Theological criticism of aesthetics

The criticism of aesthetics from a theological perspective has its origin in the Decalogue, particularly the second commandment's prohibition against making an image of God. Depending on the theological interpretation applied to the authoritative texts, a positive (*pro*) or negative (*contra*) iconoclastic tradition concerning images emerged in some regions and during various periods of Christianity. The radical iconoclasm that marked the Protestant reforms continued in the Reformed tradition and, to a lesser extent, in Pietism, when the sacred art of the medieval church had reached its climax.

The negative interpretation of the second commandment is based on its proximity to the first commandment. The two commandments together raise the barrier against all idolatry, a constant and proven danger in the time of the prophets. A representation of God can take on an autonomous role for the observer and become an object of direct or indirect worship. The first and second commandments serve to protect the heart of theology (in the narrow sense of the term)—the oneness of God which also explains the sometimes justified and sometimes exaggerated radicality of the interpretations of the second commandment. The command protects God from all idolatrous assaults, whatever the form. However, this protection also concerns man, because God does not need protection from humans. Man must be safeguarded



A portion of the Decalogue is found on the Nash Papyrus, a collection of four papyrus fragments acquired in Egypt by W. L. Nash in 1903. These were the oldest Hebrew fragments known at that time.[5]

from idolatry so he does not worship a false god that does not exist.

The barrier raised by the first two imperatives is justified as it safeguards people from any attempt to picture the invisible God and highlights a more precise means of revelation—the word. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ's earthly life, when he was visible, ends with his ascension as the Risen One, and God becomes invisible again. Seeing him must give way to the hearing of the word of God which recounts the revelations of the past.

Thomas becomes the model for all post-Easter believers who would like to see Jesus as he is but cannot fulfil their desire.[6] In contrast to what is written in many commentaries, Jesus did not reprimand Thomas but entrusted him with a great promise in the form of a macarism—a blessing (John 20:29). Thomas must no longer see himself as an aggrieved disciple because he did not witness the appearance of the Risen One like the other disciples. Thomas, and with him all the disciples of the generations to come, are just as privileged as those of Jesus' lifetime because God continues to reveal himself; however, this comes no longer by sight, but by hearing. They must all *listen* to the word of God. The priority of the word of God over sight is maintained as it was

in the Old Testament. In the Decalogue, the truth and uniqueness of God are protected. In the New Testament, after the ascension, there is a privileged form of revelation—the ultimate revelation of God in his Son Jesus cannot be surpassed (Heb 1:1–4). All that remains is the narrative of this event by the word of God. These two main axes, which run through all Scripture, motivate fundamental theological criticism in the face of aesthetic overload.

1.2. From an aesthetic theology to theological aesthetics

This criticism does not mean that we cannot develop an aesthetic theology. On the contrary, the doctrine of the word of God demands a theory of aesthetic experience, because the word of God is always communicated in a sensory manner and aims at a holistic human experience. The doctrine of the word of God assumes a critical role in aesthetics, but must, nevertheless, allow for a biblical and legitimated space so that aesthetics may develop. As indicated below, the possibilities for creating an aesthetic theology are many.

The *cultural mandate* of man (Gen 1:28) and his bodily constitution call for a general cultural creation, of which the aesthetic forms a part.

The *second commandment does not forbid the creation* of paintings and sculptures, but the *worship* of them as a deity. Linked to the first commandment, it fights against idolatry and divine representations. The Old Testament is not against artistic expression. This is demonstrated by the divine suggestions for building the tabernacle. Hebrew Scripture forbids, however, any idolatrous abuse of man's power over God—the attempt to "control" God through artistic creation. When God appears through his revelations, a desire could arise to define him through artistic creation. In this sense, the second commandment becomes a counterweight to divine revelations—God does not allow himself to be identified by his appearance, but by his acts of liberation, his covenant, and his law.



St. Thomas by Peter Paul Reubens[5]

Approaches to developing theological aesthetics exist, but, apart from the work of Von Balthasar, they are rudimentary.[7] Such a theology highlights the beauty of the theological "substance" (e.g., God himself, the figure of Christ, Easter, and the work of salvation) and not the beauty of the "form". There must be strong congruence between the aesthetics of the "substance" and the aesthetics of the "form." The relationship between the two is inseparable. The object of theology—God himself—is beautiful. His beauty is the starting point for the whole theological debate.

An aesthetic theology, by contrast, will focus on the "form" of the gospel message on the one hand, and the perception of the message by the recipient on the other. The aesthetical excesses in our cultural context naturally intersects biblical aesthetics at this point. The challenges of this correlation for contemporary missiology are enormous and should form the main axis of our contextual theology. Like it or not, missiology will find its starting point in the predominance of the aesthetics of our time. It should then develop links with aesthetic theology to lead on to theological aesthetics: an encounter with the true God beyond all forms of the perceivable. Thus, an aesthetic theology must, by definition, be attractive and non-critical to lead people towards a theological aesthetics that is fundamentally critical, balancing between the "ugly" and the "beautiful" of the divine revelation and God himself.

Theological aesthetics will always break the bonds of isolation which seek to contain it. The aesthetically sensitive cannot lead a proper existence in the long run, as we have already seen. Theological aesthetics is philosophically and anthropologically related to ethics, which also applies, of course, in theology. God is beautiful and good. The justification by grace of the sinner will always have a final moral implication. The "good" (ethics) and the "beautiful" (aesthetics) are inextricably linked. Thus, we could speak of an aesthetic ethics of the New Testament which appears, for example, in 1 Peter where the apostle speaks of "works." The "good" and "beautiful" conduct of Christians in a hostile environment can have a missionary effect on unbelievers (1 Pet 2:11–12). In Greek, *kalos* can be translated with both meanings—morality and beauty. If one separates the "beautiful" from the "good", as is frequently done in our highly stratified culture, the aesthetically sensitive will gradually deteriorate in terms of substance. It is its relationship with ethics that nourishes aesthetics. Morality can live without "beauty" from a theological point of view, but without ethics, aesthetics is doomed to die.

Aesthetics, as a scientific discipline, *sets off beauty and the ugly* as rivals. Theological aesthetics does not only deal with the "beautiful," as our experience of the infinite beauty of the Eternal One could make us believe. Even if in God there is only light, his revelation oscillates between the two poles. Beauty is an eschatological term and fits into the category of "broken by Christology." The song of the Servant of God in Isaiah 53 describes this servant to us in most repulsive terms. Christianity has interpreted this text in a messianic way. The theology of the cross is in this sense "ugly." However, this ugliness is a promise of its transformation on Easter morning which once again reflects the splendid beauty of the work of salvation. Theological aesthetics, therefore, has the crucial task to question the ambivalence of an appearance. It is thus sufficient for us to build an aesthetic theology and, in particular, a constructive aesthetic theology in the light of the doctrine of the word of God.

2. A theology of the word of God

God's communication is a precondition for any knowledge of God and a relationship with God. The word of God, therefore, occupies a primary place in the doctrine of revelation.

2.1. The meanings of the word of God

I will begin this section by summarizing the different meanings of the word of God in Scripture and theology.

God speaks through his creation which he has already created by his word.

The word of Yahweh comes to his called servants, first to Abraham, then to Moses, and finally to the prophets. In this way, God reveals his will to judge or save his people Israel.

The expression "word of God" in the Old Testament means the word spoken by God and repeated by men. This word integrates oral heritage and, subsequently, the written tradition.

In the New Testament, this expression almost solely relates to the person, work, and teaching of Jesus Christ. In the prologue to his Gospel, the evangelist John identifies the word of God with Christ incarnate—the fullness of God's revelation. Christ becomes the word of God *par excellence*.

Apostolic preaching has put the crucified and risen Christ at the center and defines the "word of God" as the historical Christ and considers his saving work to reside in the present.

The Reformers are in agreement about putting the weight on the vital importance of Scripture and its preaching, with Christ as its center. All Scripture is the word of God. Thus, God speaks to us through prophetic and apostolic words. Preaching is likewise "the word of God." Like the sacraments, it is considered a particular expression of God's grace.

All the Reformers agreed that the word of God cannot be heard, accepted, or believed without the work of the Holy Spirit. Lutheran theology argues that the Spirit works *by* the proclaimed word (*per verbum*), while in the Reformed tradition, the working of the Spirit is united *with* the word (*cum verbo*).

Karl Barth distinguishes between the incarnate word (Christ), the written word (the Bible), and the preached word (preaching). The last two forms are only indirectly identified with the word of God. God alone decides when they will become a direct word of God. The first form corresponds to direct identification.[8]

2.2. The effects of the word of God in the New Testament

The word of God is living and eternal (1 Pet 1:23). Likened to the gospel, it becomes the power for salvation (Rom 1:16) and leads to the new birth (1 Pet 1:23), a reality which proves that it is "the word of salvation" (Acts 13:26). The preferred medium for communicating the word of God is hearing (Rom 10:17). Faith is birthed by the word of Christ after his ascension. The elevated and invisible Christ will no longer be revealed by sight, but by hearing, as we have seen in our earlier discussion about Thomas. The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in enlivening the word of God, both canonically and kerygmatically. His promised presence for the post-Easter age does not leave disciples of later times helpless in the face of the invisible. Rather, the Spirit will be the true Master of the word (John 14:26) who will illuminate every human conscience for salvation or judgment (John 16:8–11). These effects define him as the "Spirit of truth" (John 14:17). The word of God and the Holy Spirit bring forth faith. However, the word also remains the prime mover in the teaching that leads to sanctification (Heb 5:11–6:3; 1 Pet 2:2). It is, therefore, decisive for the "perfection" of the believer. The "parable of the sower" (Luke 8:4–15) would be better called the "parable of the hearer" because the seed—the word of God—seeks a favorable welcome in the soil—hearing—in which it has been sown. The dynamic effect of the word of God and its correlation with human reception through listening are best demonstrated in this parable. Finally, this word creates and gathers a new community (Luke 8:19–21). The church is founded the moment she hears and obeys the word of God.

2.3. The importance of aesthetics in the Bible

These few sketches may suffice to show the crucial importance of the word of God in the Scriptures and its climax—the Son of God who is the word of God. Of course, aesthetic expression is not absent in the Bible despite pictorial and figurative restraint. God provides for it in his plan of creation and displays it in the "beautiful cult" of Israel. The prophets apply dramatic symbols when the word is no longer accepted. Christ uses various metaphors to picture a spiritual truth and to provoke a response from his audience. The concept of the parable in Mark holds the metaphor to be in service to the word (Mark 4:11–13, 33–34). The extreme aesthetic form which Jesus sometimes applies in this particular literary genre matches the closed attitude of his hearers: they "see" and understand the parable but do not want to hear God's performative word that transcends the parable itself. Thus, the parable has only a temporary and self-destructive aesthetic function when the word of God is heard and received. The Bible uses an anthropomorphic approach to describe a metaphysical world that goes beyond man's understanding. Besides, Christ is even called "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15–20), an expression not to be confused with the Greek conception of the image, but to be understood in the sense of God's revelation. Jesus is the "imprint" of God, the "firstborn." This word speaks as much for his pre-existence and incarnation as for his resurrection.

The biblical focus of the "word of God" has been examined by



The Sower by James Tissot. Opaque watercolor over graphite on gray wove paper, 24.8 x 13.7 cm. From: Brooklyn Museum, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/4502 (accessed 5 July 2019).

different theologies that range from seeing it as historical-canonical and kerygmatic words to being a theological hermeneutics and a hermeneutical theology. The written word of God refers to the eternal Word, the creative Word, and the incarnate Word. This word becomes a "linguistic event" every time it is announced and energized today by the Holy Spirit.

2.4. The relationship between aesthetics and the word of God

We have explored the theological possibilities of aesthetics and the word of God separately. It is now necessary to combine these two subjects. The substance of God's word prevails over the futility of earthly aesthetics (Matt 24:35). Aesthetics arouses emotion or stimulates attraction but, in contrast to words, it does not formulate its message. The event of the cross tears apart all superficial aesthetics and brings us back to the heart of our hidden existence. Sin has also devolved through aesthetics. Pure beauty, therefore, will only be achieved in eternity. Pure aesthetics is out of our reach because it is an eschatological category. Finally, the word of God alone is the vehicle of salvation in Jesus Christ. It brings salvation under cover of an ambivalent aesthetics as Christology contains not only "beautiful" but also "ugly" aesthetic features. Thus, the word of God must always keep its first place and be given priority over aesthetics—this order is inviolable. But while subordinating aesthetics to the word of God is necessary theologically, aesthetics stands in the service of communication.

3. A critical aesthetic missiology

When moving from theology to missiology, it is necessary to follow the same approach as aesthetic theology corresponds to a "beautiful", non-critical missiology and theological aesthetics corresponds to a critical aesthetic missiology.

"Non-critical" missiology means that we have an understanding of the aesthetic standards and expressions of our time and adopt them positively for our missionary efforts. This approach is the implicit imperative of Jesus' missionary mandate to his church. A critical aesthetic missiology is a missionary

Non-critical and critical aesthetic missiology and theology

Non-critical approaches	**Aesthetic missiology** • Quality of communication and relevance of the reception of the gospel • Art serves missionary mandate	➡	**Aesthetic theology** • Culture-gospel correlation • Theology of culture • Continuity-discontinuity • Conservation-innovation • Resource of art: contemporary aesthetics
↕			⬇
Critical approaches	**Aesthetic missiology** • Renewal and purification through theological aesthetics • Beauty of form and content • Innovation of art expressions	⬅	**Theological aesthetics** • Intrinsic beauty of God • "Beauty" and "ugliness" of theological aesthetics • Resource for art: God's being and God's inspiration

➡ = Word of God: function of resource, renewal and criticism

approach which is beautiful in its form and content *and* nourished by a solid theological aesthetics, namely, the intrinsic beauty of God. It will question and renew the church's expressions of Christian spirituality and its pastoral and missionary actions, and will itself produce new forms and works of art.

While the first model only works on the form, the second leads to the substance of things. The aim is to build a twofold opposite: the beauty and the ugly aspect of an aesthetic theology and critical aesthetic missiology that can both welcome the aesthetic demands of our contemporaries and prophetically sort them out and expose them to the word of God. Such a missiological model necessarily introduces destabilization into the seeming certainty of the effects of present-day ambiguous aesthetic culture.

The "beauty" of Jesus on the cross will have an ultimate critical function in promoting a critical aesthetic missiology.

4. A hermeneutic of the Apocalypse

Which biblical resource best helps us to build a critical aesthetic missiology? The last book of the Bible—a letter full of images and symbolism—has attracted my attention. In the book of Revelation, theological aesthetics confronts the ambiguity of contemporary aesthetics. One could also say that the twofold opposite of the beauty and ugliness of theological aesthetics destabilizes the impressive but ambiguous symbols and miracles of the Roman Empire.

Choosing an apocalyptic hermeneutic for a reading of contemporary aesthetic culture seems risky. However, it is possible if we bring the message of Revelation back to its original context by clarifying its genre, the role of its images, and the political context targeted.[9]

Revelation is first of all a Christian prophecy, then an apocalypse, and, finally, a circular letter. Such an interpretative framework avoids the errors of a purely timeless or exclusively literal interpretation. It seeks the theological meaning of the texts and allows us to use a hermeneutic for Revelation that permits a reading of contemporary aesthetic culture. We have already introduced the theme above—the ambiguity of images of the Roman Empire in Revelation meets the theological ambivalence (twofold and opposite theological aesthetics) of the book. Since this book defines itself as prophetic, we can attempt a critical contextualization of the ambivalent imagery of postmodernity.

Revelation 13 describes the excessive aesthetics of the Roman Empire in the appearance of the two "beasts" which are part of the "satanic trinity"—the dragon or serpent in chapter 12 from which all opposition to God originates, the first beast that rises from the sea, and the second beast that rises from the earth. The two fearsome beasts are endowed with extraordinary power by which they produce miraculous signs. The first is miraculously healed after a fatal wound and rises from the dead to the admiration of the people on earth (Rev 13:1–10). The second upholds the worship of the first beast and in turn

performs miracles (Rev 13:11–18). We face here an aesthetic of the miracle.

Revelation 13 is part of the "book of signs" which began in chapter 12 and continues to chapter 19. There are seven signs in these eight chapters: three in heaven (Rev 12:1, 3; 15:1) and four on earth (Rev 13:13–14; 16:14; 19:20). Only the first one is a "good" sign, coming from God. The others are expressions of God's judgment or evil. Signs create certainty; they "prove" the legitimacy of the person, power, gods, or the true God who creates them. They are linked to their originator who must reveal their true meaning because miracles do not tell everything about the context of the event. However, it is their effect that makes them attractive as they produce anxiety and certainty in the observer despite the fact that the event is never fully explained and therefore requires an explanation from the creator of the phenomenon.

For example, the seven main signs in John's Gospel (chapters 1–11) all point to Jesus, after which the use of signs stops because his glorification on the cross is no longer a sign, but the supreme and ultimate reality of the whole universe. It is the fusion of the sign with its author. There is only one reality, so the sign dissolves because the full meaning has appeared. The miracles of the two beasts (Rev 13:3–4, and especially 13–15) reflect, as many commentators point out, the military and political power of Rome. The second beast succeeds in staging an imperial cult to such an extent that the inhabitants make idols of the first beast. The second beast even manages to make the images of the beast "animate" (Rev 13:15).

After identifying the certainty of the aesthetics of the miracle, we now turn to the ambiguity of aesthetics. The sign provides certainty to aesthetics, but the latter is ambiguous because it is linked to the symbolic animal—"the beast"—which represents Roman power. John of Patmos thus reveals the false evidence of the miracle because it is linked to the misleading power of the empire and eventually, as a prophetic message, to all power of absolute evil. The ambiguity of aesthetics can contribute to total perversion as seen with both animals: the first representing imperial power and the other its powerful propaganda apparatus. John describes on Patmos the results of their actions—the promise of certainty through miracles has a considerable seductive power over men and the aesthetics of the miracle blinds men concerning the true nature of the aesthetics which is always ambiguous.

John's apocalyptic imagery delivers an aesthetic counter-performance. It brings into play the twofold aspects of theological aesthetics—the "beauty" and "ugliness" of the gospel message and, in Revelation, the beauty of the throne of God and celestial beings in chapter 4—while questioning the certainty of the aesthetics of the miracle. Theological aesthetics meets an aesthetic ambiguity, and this is the time of revelation (apocalypse). Theological aesthetics takes on the prophetic role of denouncing a possible perverted, ambiguous aesthetic expression that serves to manipulate men as the message of Revelation denounces it. The Roman power is supported by the imperial cult and its propaganda apparatus (imagery) to manipulate the population. Here, the image (aesthetics) stands in the service of perversion.

This reading of Revelation helps us to balance our non-critical and attractive aesthetic model with a critical missiology. This means that the meta-narrative of the Roman Empire has been able to maintain itself through an ambiguous aesthetic and perverted imagery along with other things. The end of meta-narratives, as a postulate of postmodernity, calls the prophetic genre of the Revelation into question. Although we have seen the end of many historical meta-narratives, we must not succumb to the idea commonly asserted that leads to an ideological vacuum. It is against this illusion that the Apocalypse stands up.

Conclusion

We will finish this brief introduction to a critical aesthetic missiology with some clear statements on the domains mentioned in the introduction which is primarily developed through research in a Western context.

Context

- The end of meta-narratives—the grand, all-encompassing ideological, political, religious, or philosophical narratives—which characterizes the postmodern era, strangely enough, marks the end of art history.[10] In the logic and dynamics of this era, art objects become autonomous; that is, they have a value in themselves without necessarily belonging to a school of thought or history. Art (especially modern art), we are told, is autonomous, and one should treat it this way.

- The almost complete museumization of all Christian classical art in the West closes development of secularization. From paintings with biblical subjects up to sacred music and liturgical utensils, artistic objects have been removed from their original places and are preserved in museums to be admired by visitors.

- The same applies to a growing number of Christian communities in the West—one increasingly treats them as "museums" of the past. The "museumification", therefore, also concerns the church as a human community. In the eyes of our Western contemporaries, Christianity is already part of history and Christians are considered out-of-date, sometimes even reactionary.

Theology

- Will we at any time soon enter a time which we can describe as a fifth "post-" era—the post-aesthetic one? Whether we do or not, I have tried to lead us towards a prospective theological aesthetics that embraces the aesthetic demands of our contemporaries to confront them with the beauty of Jesus Christ. The human and historical sciences are bound to describe the world by their tools and methods. The dogma of empiricism and scientific methodological reductionism constrains them to do so. However, they have the disadvantage of narrowing the horizon since their analysis concerns the past and ends abruptly in the present. The lack of hope in secular Western culture is blatant.[11]

- What link could we make, then, between the aestheticization of the world and theology? We have seen above that beauty finds its theological habitation in eschatology. A prospective theology for today must, therefore, think and occupy precisely the space between a presumed aesthetic period—or perhaps one that has already passed—and the hope of the perfect beauty to come—the Lord's return in glory. A post-aesthetic context has to correlate with a theology of pre-Parousia. Eschatology thus launches an essential movement in our present history. Christ's disciples are waiting

eagerly for this event. One could say that the expected supreme beauty produces the strength to proclaim (theologize) and create (make art).

- The work of art critic Hans Belting is telling for theologians. His research interest is no longer only an object of art, but the relationship between the person and the object or as he puts it, the "faith" between these two. The interest shifts from the work to the view. What "faith" produces the image? How does an observer define the "true image"? These are the questions he explores. Belting's research invites theologians to explore this "faith" in the image and to build a contextual approach with this idea which is also fundamental in the Bible.[12]

Church

- The church will continue her rich tradition of critical and positive approaches to images and to encourage and critique present-day artistic creation.

- The aesthetic wing of Christianity, embracing so readily the demand for images and experiences today, also handles the sword of the aesthetics of the miracle—the extraordinary life of faith in general and of healing in particular. However, this sword is double-edged, both in the domain of contextualization and the spectacular. There is a risk that it may itself succumb to a non-critical contextualization or become an autonomous sign that separates it from its origin (God). As a result, the church succumbs to a manipulated image and to worshipping her own experiences. Here, we are in the domain of what the Bible calls idolatry. The experience is cut off from the message of the gospel; it is no longer *extra nos*. In this case, it would be the end of the Protestant postulate, or, in short, the destruction of the gospel.

- The hermeneutics of Revelation keeps the church awake. The book's scathing criticism of Roman ideology becomes a warning to the Western church—she must not use the aesthetic side of her missiological model uncritically; otherwise, she will be reduced to the "beautiful." An autonomous aesthetics does not exist but is linked to an ideology or a meta-narrative. The Christians of that time did not automatically have a clear understanding of the imagery of the Roman Empire, regardless of their oppression. Some people and parts of society, with Christians among them, were favored by the Empire and enjoyed some privileges; they could easily succumb to the cult of the Empire.

Missiology

- Some time ago, young evangelists discovered that cyberspace is a new place for mission. Many people live in this new reality for several hours every day. It is the synthesis of a technical feat and the human aspiration for a beautiful parallel world, a product seemingly far from classic Christian aesthetic expression. However, appearances are deceiving. As journalist Margaret Wertheim explains: "Cyberspace is not a religious construct *per se*, but … one way of understanding this new digital domain is as an attempt to construct a technological substitute for the Christian Space of Heaven."[13]

- This way of defining another reality also partially ties into artistic creation. Art is a means of mission for our Western society where images have replaced words and art has become autonomous. However, for evangelicals, evangelization is a strenuous activity because we have much to catch up on after decades of distancing ourselves from culture and art in particular. Not only is it a question of improving worship music or enriching the communication style of the church, but of encouraging the creation of a work that appeals to contemporaries, with a theology of culture as a background. Missiologists, in particular, need good resources to support artists in our ranks because they deal with the issue of culture on a daily basis.

- Our artistic efforts need to become part of a rigorous contextualization model which I have called *aesthetic-eschatological missiology of temporary crisis*. We no longer have any choice. While firmly clinging to a theology of the word of God, we must joyfully and seriously confront aesthetics. We know that in the present period of crisis this challenging path is destined to be a temporary road for us to travel before the final bright light of the Parousia.[14] **MRT**

[1] This contribution is a synthesis and reformulation of the chapters "The Domination of Aesthetics and Ethics" (197–203), "Aesthetics and the Word" (246–55), and "An Aesthetic Missiology" (314–22) of my doctoral thesis. Jean-Georges Gantenbein, *Mission en Europe. Une étude missiologique pour le XXIe siècle*, Studia Oecumenica Friburgensia 72 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016) and a conference at the Doctoral School of the Theological Faculty of the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, 5 October 2018. For most of the footnotes, it is necessary to refer to my thesis. In the original, I used the Nouvelle Bible Segond, 2002.

[2] Patrick Evrard, "Esthétique," *Encylopédie du protestantisme* (Paris: Cerf and Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1995), 521–527.

[3] I am talking here about our age and not about the cultural richness of the past, the rich legacy of humanity, which is now "museumized" as far as the West is concerned. I am talking about an aesthetic innovation by the word of God. As I am well aware, generalization always suffers from exceptions.

[4] This alludes to the sociological approach by Zygmunt Bauman.

[5] Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. The image is a faithful photographic reproduction of a two-dimensional, public domain work of art and is in the public domain in its country of origin, the United States, and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.

[6] Fréderic Rognon, "La foi au risque du doute," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 88 (January–March 2008): 21–53.

[7] Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics*, 7 vols. (London: T. & T. Clark, 1983–90).

[8] Markus Bockmühl, "Wort Gottes a) biblisch," in *Evangelisches Lexikon für Theologie und Gemeinde*, ed. Helmut Burkhardt et al. (Wuppertail/Zurich: Brockhaus, 1994), vol. 3, 2186–8.

[9] I follow here mainly Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).

[10] Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987).

[11] See Bosch's last contribution before his death: David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995).

[12] Hans Belting, *Das echte Bild: Bildfragen als Glaubensfragen* (München: Beck, 2005).

[13] Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2000), 18.

[14] I would like to thank Mrs. Birgit Currlin (MA Missiology, MA Translation) for translating this article from French into English.

A Response to "The Good News in a World of Aesthetics"

David Eastwood



David has served for twenty seven years in Taiwan with OMF International. During that time his ministry has involved Bible teaching, evangelism, and leading church planting teams focused on Taiwan's working class. David initially trained at All Nations Christian College but has since completed studies with Singapore Bible College and Spurgeon's College, where the focus of his master's thesis was "Contextual preaching to the Taiwanese working class." He is currently the Field Director for OMF Taiwan.

The introduction to Gantenbein's paper sets out the three challenges to Christian missionaries in a modern Western world:

- *The Context*—an aesthetic image-orientated, experience-driven society.
- *Theology*—generally word-orientated and negative towards aesthetics.
- *Church*—either "museumized" (a new word for me) and seemingly irrelevant or at risk of succumbing to a non-critical contextualisation.

I don't think many of us need convincing that we live in a world dominated by aesthetics. I agree with Gantenbein's claim in the introduction that "Protestant and evangelical Christians are poorly equipped for this new context because they think and act from a word of God theology." My own experience is that evangelical theological discussions are generally more concerned with focusing on the question of what is factual and true than with what is "attractive, influential, motivating." Yet a focus on Scripture as the word of God cannot ignore the fact that in the absence of any picture of God, the Bible presents us with anthropomorphic imagery to describe the attributes of God and ultimately Jesus as the visible God made flesh.

As a young Christian keen to evangelise anyone who would listen, I remember a rare sunny summer's day taking a walk with my brother and his girlfriend and trying various unsuccessful approaches to persuade them that God exists. Walking through the Cotswold countryside, we came to a graveyard and large, ancient village church. We went inside (in those days churches were left unlocked) and the cool dark interior with the blue light from the stained glass windows gave a sense of calm. Walking to the middle of the church we looked up at the beautiful vaulted roof and my brother's girlfriend whispered, "Wow! No wonder people used to believe in God!" The beauty of the church was more effective than my wordy attempts to explain the divine.

The fastest growth of churches today is also in churches with an "aesthetic" emphasis. But for many of these, the aesthetic has seemingly shifted from the feelings of awe, inspired by architecture and art, to feelings inspired by worship and atmosphere. I agree that this is seen strongly within the Pentecostal, charismatic and neo-charismatic churches. I think also we see in many traditional evangelical churches a struggle between wanting to be seen as having a strongly word-based ministry (hence claiming the focus of the service is on preaching and teaching) and the awareness that music and atmosphere play a key role in the whole experience of church. Recently, I had the experience of being in a darkened church interior where the worship band was illuminated by spotlights while the congregation could barely see each other. The feeling was of participating in a concert event. But then there seemed a huge disconnect when the lights came back on and I stood up to preach the sermon. People are trying to recover the sense of awe, transcendence, and the holy otherness of God.

For churches with a Bible/word emphasis, there is often a clear disconnect between the larger society where aesthetics is key and a church that fails to acknowledge the importance of aesthetics and so fails to consider how an aesthetic component is part of what they consider important to the faith—that is, the Bible, theology, and missions. Aesthetics is never completely ignored but is not integrated so that it is seen, on the one hand, as an element of conflict of values or a necessary evil (pandering to modern society) or, on the other, as an area of life where Bible-based teaching has nothing to say or contribute that is relevant. And it is this disconnect that this paper addresses. In this "dazzling context" of an aesthetic-driven society, Gantenbein says, "we would first need a 'beautiful' theology and then above all a theological aesthetic."

Gantenbein thus proposes a theology of balanced aesthetics linking aesthetics to a solid foundation in the word of God. In the introduction, he summarises some of the philosophical background to the subject. Kant, for example, wrestles with the term "beautiful" to question if it is subjective or universal. For us, as Christians, the appreciation of beauty must originate from God, and in his conclusion Gantenbein suggests that the beauty to be revealed in the Parousia produces the strength to proclaim and create—to theologize and make art. But we live in a fallen world and to what extent is our appreciation of aesthetics conditioned by sin, culture, and environment? Clearly, some things that are beautiful and attractive are not always things that we should give our attention to (cf. Gen 3:6). These are the questions of contextualisation that we, as missionaries, need to grapple with.

1. Theological criticism of aesthetics

I appreciate the analysis of how the iconoclastic tradition of the Protestant reformations stems from the first two of the Ten Commandments. Living in Taiwan, a country where temple worship involves the use of many carved images of gods, I am very aware that the danger of a Christian use of idols is they lead to a lessening of God's glory by shifting power from God to man. In Taiwan, by presenting images as conduits to the gods, a two-way relationship of dependency is created where the idols being served by man also serve as a way for man to influence the gods, thus diminishing their power. Theologically, the danger of associating man-derived concepts of beauty with God is that this achieves the idolatrous step of reducing God to something less than he is. But if it is correct that there is a true "beauty" associated with God's glory, then to remove any aesthetic is to lessen God's revelation of himself. God chose to reveal himself in part aesthetically, using emotive human language and anthropomorphic terms. If we look at the Old Testament use of language (e.g., in wisdom literature), architecture (e.g., the intricate details given of the temple), and the description of artists as being filled with the Spirit,[1] we might conclude God has accepted our limited understanding of true beauty but still wants us to appreciate him through the aesthetics of human poetry, art, and architecture.



Public domain image from https://www.maxpixel.net/Cathedral-Dom-Germany-Church-Window-1707634.

I found Gantenbein's explanation of the words of Jesus to Thomas to be interesting, as I have never looked at the text in this way before. It is incredible that even though Jesus is the visible picture of God and the fulfilment of all that Israel, the priesthood, the Scriptures, and the temple were supposed to reveal, we are left at the end of the Gospels with the idea that the hearer (or reader) is blessed by hearing about Jesus and that the actual visible witness is not necessary. That this shows that it is no longer necessary to see the physical Jesus to be blessed by God's self-revelation is clear to me. That it sets a priority of hearing God's revelation (word) seems also acceptable as long as removal of Jesus as the visible image of God from the earth is not used as an excuse for some kind of an aesthetic cessationism—a claim that the coming of Scripture means that God no longer uses aesthetics to communicate with us in any way. Jesus, as the image of God, is revealed in his teaching and mission rather than his visible appearance. But his teaching and mission is revealed to us in culturally-enmeshed stories whose appeal over the centuries has always had a strong aesthetic as well as didactic element. What's more, there is no suggestion that the Old Testament has become irrelevant for us and that we are no longer to derive our theology from texts filled with pictures, images, and poetic language. In the section, "A theology of aesthetics," Gantenbein shows that he is in agreement with this, pointing out that a theology of aesthetics should pay attention to the aesthetic experience "because the word of God is always communicated in a sensory manner way and aims at a holistic human experience."

The paper prompted me to think a little about the distinction between "theological aesthetics" and "aesthetic theology". Theological aesthetics highlights the beauty of the theological "substance". Gantenbein's demonstration that God himself, as the starting point for theology, is beautiful is of great importance. Other writers have focused on creation as God's "beautiful design," with human beings as the crown of God's work,[2] but to ignore the fact that created beauty is now flawed beauty is to open the door to accepting aesthetic values uncritically.

Aesthetic theology focuses on the form of the gospel message and its perception by the recipient. This is the place where theology meets the challenge of aesthetic excess in culture. This is the starting point of missiology! We are rightly led back to theological aesthetics that is critical.

The paper hints at the strong link between ethics (what is good/bad) and aesthetics (what is beautiful/ugly) which obviously overlap in the area of values. "It is the relationship with ethics that nourishes aesthetics." Both ethics and aesthetics are often culturally determined and in modern culture devoid of absolutes. Just as Christians cannot afford to be irrelevant to discussions about ethics in the modern world, we cannot be totally irrelevant to aesthetics when these shape and are shaped by values in society. This is worth more consideration.

I believe that many young Christians attempt to recover relevance only to throw out the old "museumized" aesthetics of Christianity. In doing so, they have also rejected the theology that

went with it and are dangerously left with a Christianity driven by aesthetics and a desire to be modern at the expense of critical engagement.

2. A theology of the word of God

The second section of the paper takes most of us back into our comfort zones by returning us to the word of God. I found myself remembering my own studies in preaching and the discussion of the different roles the word, context, the Holy Spirit, and the listener play so that the preaching event becomes God's word to an individual. There has been a lot of work done in recent years on the use of narrative in communication and the role of the listener in constructing the message. And for this reason, it was good to see some strong statements that aesthetics "arouses emotions and attracts attention but … does not formulate its message," that "subordinating aesthetics to the word of God is necessary theologically," and also that "aesthetics stands in the service of speech."

3. Critical aesthetic missiology

The third section of the paper delineating a "critical aesthetic missiology" is key. All readers will benefit from pondering the very carefully worded definitions given here. Just as with other aspects of contextualization, it calls for a careful balance between recognising positive aspects within a culture that can be used and adapted by the church and a critical assessment of culture in the light of biblical values and theology. This is familiar stuff to most missionaries when it comes to religious language, metaphors, and rituals seen in the society that we are trying to reach. Even so, many of us may not have given much thought to this challenge in the area of aesthetics. I am grateful for the grid produced here which made it a lot easier for me to sort out the differences between a non-critical aesthetic theology and a critical theological aesthetics.

4. Hermeneutics and Apocalypse

In the fourth section of his paper, Gantenbein discusses an apocalyptic passage as a case study. Revelation seems to have an aesthetic value that for much of church history has been appreciated with little attempt at a historical analysis such as the one given here. The beasts have become symbols of Satanic opposition for readers who generally do not understand the necessary historical context. Obviously, this is not ideal, and it leads to a great danger of misinterpretation. In a sense there has always been a tendency to interpret apocalyptic literature in a postmodern way, with little consideration for the original meaning. The warning to the church of the non-existence of an autonomous aesthetics and the danger of uncritical use of the aesthetic side of her missiological model is a timeless message which Gantenbein has derived exegetically from a historical situation. As the conclusion to this discussion seemed to have been shifted to the last bullet point under church in the concluding section, the full flow of the discussion was somewhat harder to follow. Furthermore, the use of language in this section may make it less accessible to many readers. Even so, those who engage with Gantenbein's lines of thought will find it to be a worthwhile mental exercise.

Conclusions

The concluding section was most helpful. Returning to the headings of Context, Theology, Church, and Missiology, this section concludes with a call for an "aesthetic-eschatological missiology of temporary crisis" which seemed to summarize or conclude the lines of thought followed in the paper.

As the paper is a discussion of an example of missiological contextualization, it contains a lot of thoughts and arguments which should be familiar to cross-cultural workers. The question of the relationship between the gospel and culture is something all missionaries have struggled with in many areas. And, as Bible-believing Christians, we are clear that the general hermeneutical direction should be from the core of the Bible's teaching towards the culture. Yet at the same time, as missionaries, we are also aware that the biblical text and the reader exist within human culture and there is a complex interaction involved—in this case between aesthetic images, language, and values.

Though this work was developed from a Western perspective, I found myself considering how a different context might influence a critical aesthetic missiology. Some Chinese art, such as the Mountain and Water—*shan shui* (山水)—style, intends the observer to appreciate it philosophically from the perspective of someone standing inside rather than outside the painting. It is often intended to be appreciated with an accompanying poem. Does that perspective subtly shift the aesthetic understanding of beauty? Taiwanese folk religions are sensual and visual, the temples being filled with images and colours. But the architecture is not designed like old Western churches to evoke a sense of awe and holy otherness. If anything, it evokes a sense of presence, activity, involvement, and approachability. Yet, churches in Taiwan continue to resemble unattractive warehouses or school classrooms. I see similar issues in other countries in Asia.

Contextualisation in Asia has largely focused on texts and doctrines and so is often a library exercise for the sake of another PhD. But this has left the churches of Asia without missiological tools to handle either the beautiful aesthetics of their old cultures or the aesthetic bombardment of modern culture. I would like to thank Dr. Gantenbein for taking up the challenge of responding to today's aesthetic-dominated society by recognising not just the threat but also the opportunity to "demuseumify' our churches and make them places where beauty is valued.
MRT

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[1] See the example of Bezalel of whom it is said: "I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all *manner* of workmanship, to design artistic works" (Exod 31:1–5, NKJV).
[2] Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics*, Studies in Historic and Systematic Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019).

The Gospel of Liberation and the Implications for the Church in Relation to People with Disabilities

Peter Rowan



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John Stott once said: "We may well feel ashamed that we were not in the vanguard of the liberation movement, and that we did not develop an evangelical liberation theology."[1] But as one theologian remarked, "perhaps it is never too late"![2]

This paper is *not* about liberation theology *per se*. That is not because I think liberation theologies are dead, irrelevant, or unimportant for evangelicals to engage with. Quite the contrary, and I refer the reader to the contributions of John Corrie[3] and John Coffey[4] who have each sought to reclaim a biblical theology of liberation.[5]

What this paper *is* about is the liberating message of the gospel. I intend to ground my thoughts in Luke's Gospel, to make some application to the church in relation to people with disabilities, and to say essentially three things:

1. *The gospel is a liberating message.* As José Miguez-Bonino reminds us: in Jesus Christ "a new world has erupted, a new age is inaugurated under the sign of liberation, from the world, from sin, from death, from the law, a liberation that is to be consummated in the Parousia. The Christian is [thus] called to liberty (Gal. 5:1, 13), a liberty which is both an anticipation of the definitive freedom to come and a stimulus for a new life (Rom. 8:15–27), a liberation that the whole creation desires and awaits (v 22)."[6]

2. *The scope of that liberation is holistic*. In surveying the various paradigms mission has been viewed through, John Corrie settles on liberation: "all these possibilities are in fact dimensions of an integral liberation which looks for the total transformation of people and contexts when the Kingdom of God comes in power."[7]

3. *The Church is called to proclaim that liberating message in word and deed*. The church is sent into the world to be salt and light, and to proclaim the good news in word, deed, and sign—that a new way of freedom, hope, and transformation is now possible under the reign and rule of God's kingdom.

These three points are centered in the Lord Jesus Christ whose earthly ministry and redemptive work is essentially characterized by liberation. However, one of the obstacles to the church grasping the full extent of the Bible's liberating message is the tendency in Western Christian circles to operate with an abstract Jesus—that is, a picture that is not necessarily wrong but incomplete due to inadequate attention to the *life* of Jesus.

Some forty years ago, the Latin American theologian Orlando E. Costas wrote that any authentic witness to the truthfulness of the gospel message must involve, first of all, "testifying to the *reality* of the life of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Acts 10:39; Luke 1:2)."[8] Costas wrote against the back-drop of debates surrounding the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus. In today's evangelical scene, we too often operate with an abstract notion of Jesus, notably when it comes to the atonement. We detach Jesus' life from his death and effectively emphasize only the latter.

According to David Smith, African Christians complain that Western theology "moves too quickly from the cradle to the cross," resulting in a truncated gospel in which the cross of Christ is extracted from its historical context.[9] In the early church, the message of the cross and resurrection was never divorced from the life of the incarnate Christ.

> Indeed, where the tendency toward an abstract, context-less and purely spiritual form of salvation appears in the New Testament it is vigorously challenged by the insistence that the Christ whose death was a sacrifice for the sins of the world is "the

> Righteous One", a title which reflects the memory of the life that Jesus lived in Galilee. Any claim to belong to him must be validated by a life that reflects the holiness, compassion and dedication to God's will which we find recorded in the Gospel accounts of Jesus of Nazareth: "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6). That apostolic injunction remains as necessary and urgent today as it was in the first century, and in a globalised world in which the "cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and his pride in possessions" (1 John 2:15–17) is greater than ever before, it provides the key to the liberation of the gospel so urgently needed in the twenty first century.[10]

The need to keep a text such as 1 John 2:6 at the forefront of our thinking about mission is one of the ways liberation theology continues to challenge us. Scott Sunquist's assessment of the emergence of liberation theology is helpful at this point. Describing it as "a new type of contextualization," he says it was different from older liberal theology and from Marxism:

> Unlike older liberal theologies, liberation theology was strongly biblical (focusing on the person of Jesus), and it was "from below." Liberal theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not speak of Jesus the way liberation theology did, and liberal theology, which was more of an academic movement, tended to be more elitist. Unlike Marxist revolutionaries, however, liberation theologians were theologians; they understood human sin, and they did not sell out to a utopian vision. All utopias end in violence; they make promises they cannot keep and end up forcing their will on both people and structures. Liberation theologians were more realistic and more theological.[11]

One of the questions liberation theologies continue to pose to anyone concerned with world mission is this: "Is it valid to theologise about mission from a position of privilege and safety, or should greater identification with the Suffering Servant be a requirement for real theological reflection?"[12]

If we hear the challenge of 1 John 2:6 to "walk as Jesus did," then the answer to that question is no, it is not valid. Rather, we need to reject abstract notions of Jesus, give greater attention than we have done to the counter-cultural shape of his ministry and life, and be prepared to enter the space of the "other", costly though that will be. So when we speak of "theologizing" and "costliness" we are talking about theologizing in the context of the margins, not the comfort of an armchair—a theologizing that is done in the practical engagement of the real issues that face real communities.

In the opening chapter of his seminal book, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, John Stott argued that a proper biblical basis for a social concern required, among other things, a fuller doctrine of Christ.



Luke 14 Banquet, 195cm x 510cm, by Hyatt Moore, 2015, www. hyattmoore.com, Courtesy Joni and Friends, Agora Hills, California.

To get his point across, he noted the example of Bishop Proano in Chile:

> Proano preached at a mass for Marxist students in Quito. He portrayed Jesus as the radical he was, the critic of the establishment, the champion of the downtrodden, the lover of the poor, who not only preached the gospel but also gave compassionate service to the needy. After the mass there was a question-time, during which some students said: "If we had known *this* Jesus, we would never have become Marxists".[13]

With that preamble in place, we come to Luke 4:16–18, a passage that plays an important part in Luke's two-volume work. This passage helps us in understanding the ministry of Jesus, as well as the themes of kingdom, gospel, reversal, and liberation.

Here is one of the most dramatic texts in the Bible and the nearest we get to Jesus having a mission statement. The passage plays an important role in Luke's Gospel because it sets the tone for his first volume in a similar way to how the quotation from Joel, quoted by Peter in Acts 2, sets the tone for his second. It is also one of several key texts in the Bible that has at different times shaped the church's understanding about what it is called to be and do as a witnessing community of God's people among the nations.

From this passage and others in Luke, and using a rather broad brush, I want to set out three parameters for understanding the gospel of liberation.

1. The liberating message begins *in the peripheral places*

"Jesus returned to **Galilee** … He went to Nazareth …" (vv 14–16).

Galilee is a symbol of the periphery. Jesus focused his mission in the province of Galilee—the marginal sector of the Jewish nation at that time. Nathaniel's question in John 1:46, "can anything good come out of Galilee?" reflected the view that people at the time—especially priests and Pharisees (John 7:52)—generally held about Galilee, that nothing good comes out of *that* place and among *those* people. Galilee was a mixed bag of peoples.

As René Padilla points out:

> This attitude no doubt had much to do with the prejudice of the Jews from the south toward that province where the racial mixture of Jews and Gentiles had given rise to its name: *Galilee*, literally, "the circle", with the connotation of a "circle of pagans".[14]

It was no accident that Jesus started the core of his ministry in the despised region of Galilee. He "identified himself with the 'non-persons' of Galilee and, starting with them, he laid the foundations for a new humanity."[15] So, for Padilla, "Jesus' Galilean option has a profound theological



meaning." It was not simply a matter of circumstances but follows a trajectory set in the Old Testament for how the God of Israel chooses to work out his redemptive, liberating purposes for his people and his world. It is also echoed in the Apostle Paul's words to the Corinthians:

> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Corinthians 1:26–29, NRSV).

Indeed, Costas asserts that:

> If, as the various books of the New Testament teach, evangelization is addressed in the first place to the poor, the dispossessed, and the oppressed, and if they are the most able to understand the meaning of the gospel (cf. Matt. 11:25), then it follows that Galilee, as a symbol of the periphery, should be understood as a universal in relation to the theology of evangelization. Thus, the particularity of the periphery should inform all and each evangelizing context.[16]

If we follow Jesus to the peripheral places, that will mean going to the marginalized, to the least reached people in our societies—to the dispossessed, the disinherited, the nobodies, the oppressed, those people who are typically overlooked by society and pushed to the margins.[17]

One such group are people with disabilities. The World Health Organization estimates that one billion people live with a disability and that eighty percent of these persons live in developing countries.[18] According to official estimates, there are 17,150,000 disabled people in Southeast Asia (Timor Leste, Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos). Paul Chaney of Cardiff University points out that

> a demographic shift towards an ageing population means that over the next quarter century it is likely that *Southeast Asian countries will experience the greatest international growth in the number of disabled people*. Yet, as the United Nations notes, many are currently denied their human rights … : "common concerns include impunity for serious rights violations [… and] the ill treatment and poor legal protection of … persons with disabilities".[19]

In a significant, though neglected, section of *The Cape Town Commitment* we read that

> Disabled people form one of the largest minority groups in the world … The majority of these live in the least developed countries, and are among the poorest of the poor. Although physical or mental impairment is a part of the daily experience of disabled people, most are also disabled by social attitudes, injustice and lack of access to resources.[20]

Specific disability-related implications will be addressed later in this paper, but for now we note how Jesus' ministry—even its geography—reminds us of how God works from the periphery, and that "[t]he church's existence in the margins is an intentional prophetic presence that calls attention to God's purposes for the margins."[21]

> The periphery is the place where all of us should be leaving behind the dreams of greatness, self-importance and public recognition that many times are directly associated with the institutional churches and should not be part of a servant church, a prophetic and liberating church.[22]

Where is our Galilee? Who are our Galileans? Might the growing number of people with disabilities in Southeast Asia be one of the "peripheries" which God is calling OMF to engage with?

2. The liberating message is *integral in its scope*

Harvie Conn highlights a major challenge many churches still face regarding a gospel witness that engages those on the periphery: "Our pietist



The Woman with an Infirmity of Eighteen Years by James Tissot (Public domain), via Wikimedia Commons. This is a faithful photographic reproduction of a two-dimensional, public domain work of art and is thus in the public domain in its country of origin, the United States, and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.

tradition segregates 'spirituality' from 'the world'. And our fear of the 'social gospel' spectre haunts our ability to formulate theology for the marginalised, the people on periphery."[23]

This is why it is important to ground our understanding of the gospel within the context of the whole Bible, rather than selected, isolated texts. Our text of Luke 4 has clear connections with the exodus, with the Jubilee institution, and with the book of Isaiah.

Two key aspects of the Jubilee institution are found in Leviticus 25:10—release/liberty and return/restoration. "Jubilee is about justice: redemption and restoration; liberation and renewal."[24] These themes then echo throughout the rest of Scripture and take on a wider metaphorical application, for instance, in the later chapters of Isaiah and in the mission of the Servant of Yahweh. Jubilee themes are found in Isaiah 58, and earlier in chapter 35. But it is Isaiah 61:1–2 which Jesus reads in our Luke 4 passage and then claims to fulfil.

Chris Wright's book, *The Mission of God*, sets out a comprehensive case for understanding the Jubilee as a model for restoration, combining ethical and missional implications for today's church.[25] In a chapter addressing that topic, Wright incorporates the work of Paul Hertig and his four-fold, holistic understanding of the Jubilee as presented in Luke's Gospel:

> Luke will not allow us to interpret this Jubilee language as flowery metaphors or spiritual allegories … Jesus fulfilled the Jubilee that he proclaimed. His radical mission was the very mission of God found in the Old Testament proclamation of Jubilee. It is presented in Luke's Gospel as holistic in four aspects:
>
> 1. It is both proclaimed and enacted
> 2. It is both spiritual and physical
> 3. It is both for Israel and the nations
> 4. It is both present and eschatological[26]

This passage is both spiritual and socio-political because the gospel deals with the totality of sin's impact in our lives, in our societies, and across the whole of creation. So in the New Testament, we see an integral connection between the verbal proclamation of the apostles and the visible attraction of the church as it demonstrated social and economic equality (e.g. Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37).

Further, the Jubilee is connected to the biblical theme of justice. In the Bible, justice is about establishing harmony in the community through right relationships, and this is what lies behind the mechanisms of Jubilee in terms of restoration and release. "Thus," says Andrew Kirk, "in a sense, justice is another word for liberation: the removal of the barriers which prevent human beings from participating fully in the benefits and responsibilities of the community."[27] Therefore, an essential part of our proclaiming the liberating good news of Jesus Christ for people with disabilities must involve the removal of social barriers that prevent their full participation in society, a work that most often needs to begin within the church community itself.

As Amos Yong explains:

> disability is to be understood not only in biological or medical terms, but also in social terms. In other words, people with disabilities are not only individuals who have physical or mental/intellectual challenges; they are people who confront challenges made worse by the attendant social stigmas and attitudes which subjugate them. Hence, people with disabilities not only suffer physically (although some really may not suffer in this sense at all, but non-disabled people impute suffering to them based on normal assumptions), but also are afflicted by the social prejudices that they have to deal with every day. Indeed, the tragedy and evils of disability have less to do with the biomedical conditions of human bodies than with the social repercussions of an ableist and normate bias.[28]

When we think about what it means to proclaim the good news in all its fullness to people on the periphery, such as those with disabilities, we must think holistically. *The Cape Town Commitment* expresses this clearly:

> Serving people with disabilities does not stop with medical care or social provision; it involves fighting alongside them, those who care for them and their families, for inclusion and equality, both in society and in the Church. God calls us to mutual friendship, respect, love, and justice.[29]

When it comes to the Jubilee, there is scholarly consensus that it "points to the kind of society that will be manifest when God fully reigns among his people" and that "[t]he new community called into being by Jesus Christ was to be a 'jubilee' community not once every 49 years, but in its daily practice."[30] Therefore, *The Cape Town Commitment*'s call to mutual friendship, respect, love, and justice towards people with disabilities calls forth characteristics and actions that must surely mark the radical kingdom community that the gospel creates.

3. The liberating message *creates communities of transformation*

It is striking that while Luke's Gospel has eleven references to "the poor", the word does not appear in Luke's second volume at all. Why is this? Could it be that Luke is going out of his way to show us that in the Spirit-empowered community of the church, the new order of God's reign prevails to such an extent that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 3:34)?

So the church, as the community of the kingdom, reverses the norms of society to reflect the new society of God's reign. We cannot simply say, "Don't look at the church, look at Jesus!," because the church is God's showcase of what happens when Jesus Christ reigns in his new community. In Jayakumar Christian's words, "The local church's presence in the margins is a redemptive-disruptive prophetic presence—a signpost to the kingdom of God."[31]

In this section I want to explore more fully the implications of the liberating message of the gospel for people with disabilities.

What has the attitude of the church been towards persons with disabilities?

At the risk of generalizing, the church's attitude towards people with disabilities has often been characterised by paternalism. That is, the church usually engages in a ministry for disabled people where the able (strong) give down to the disabled (weak) in an effort to meet a "perceived need".

There is a need for the church to reflect theologically on this attitude and type of ministry, and

to begin accessing the resources and perspectives developed through the academic and practitioner discipline of "disability theology" which is:

> the attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities … [resulting in] a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability.[32]

At the recent *Beyond the Boundaries* conference which I attended in Oxford, England, OMF (UK), together with two other organizations—The Oxford Centre for Mission Studies[33] and Tiō[34] —sought to take the theological conversation forward by bringing together the two disciplines and use insights from both disability theology and missiology specifically to look at intellectual disability.

Yet, in general, few missiologists engage with disability theology. The two most prominent in this field are Amos Yong and Benjamin Conner, with Lesslie Newbigin having previously entered this sphere, very much ahead of his time in the 1970s. Ben Conner explains the relevance of missiology to disability studies, suggesting that:

> contemporary missiologists, especially those who have attended to cross-cultural perspectives and those who were on the receiving end of paternalism, exclusion, and marginalization, have developed theological concepts and practices that can support disability advocates with the task of developing a contextualized disability theology and for reimagining the church's witness.[35]

He adds that

> At the heart of missiology, then, lies the openness to encounter, to risk change for the sake of enriching and amplifying the gospel, which is ripe for a dialogue with the insights from disability studies and the perspectives of people with disabilities.[36]

The Oxford conference was structured around three "conversations":

1. *A Human Conversation*: listening to the biblical voice on humanity in light of intellectual disability: drawing our values from the original source.

2. *A Gospel Conversation*: exploring the biblical dynamic of the gospel in light of intellectual disability: extending our understanding of the shape and scope of gospel encounters.

3. *A Church Conversation*: exploring the biblical vision of Christian community in light of intellectual disability: radicalizing our practices to extend our influence.[37]

So there is *a theological engagement question* that the church needs to grapple with, and we will come to some specific ecclesiological issues towards the conclusion of this paper. But there is also *a hermeneutical question* about how our reading of the Bible frames our engagement (or lack of it) with disability. This is an area to which Amos Yong has made a significant contribution. Yong's book, *The Bible, Disability and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God*, explores a "disability hermeneutic". This is "an approach to the Bible that is informed by the experiences of disability."[38] Three basic elements inform this hermeneutic:

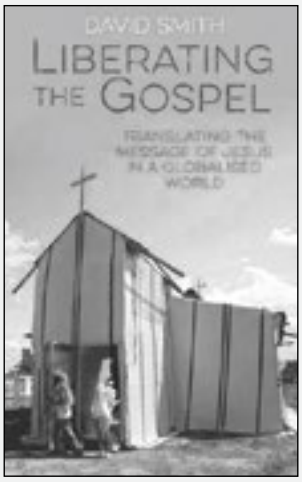
1. *People with disabilities are created in the image of God that is measured according to the person of Christ, not by any Mr. Universe or Ms. America*. As we know, God doesn't make mistakes, and people with disabilities should be appreciated as being uniquely different, even differently-abled.

2. *People with disabilities are people first who shouldn't be defined solely by their disabilities.* More particularly, people with disabilities are agents in their own right. Of course, some are more capable of independent agency than others, but we now realize that our historical perspectives that pitied such people are misinformed. People with disabilities should be allowed to define their own needs and wants, to the extent that such is possible, and should be consulted rather than cared for paternalistically as if they were completely helpless creatures.

3. *Disabilities are not necessarily evil or blemishes to be eliminated.* Should we avoid losing a functional arm or leg if we can? Of course. But many who have lost the functionality of an arm or a leg lead very productive and satisfying lives—they don't need to be healed.[39]

Instead of reading Scripture to those with disabilities we must do all we can to read *with* and *alongside* them. By reading the Bible through the lens of disability, "we are enabled to see real people with real issues, move beyond our tendency to spiritualize references to disability, or to read a healing passage and solely extract a proof of the divinity of Christ."[40]

For instance, if we take a couple of examples from Luke's writings we can see how reading the Bible through the



Liberating the Gospel: Translating the Message of Jesus Christ in a Globalised World

David Smith. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2016.

Responding to Tom Wight's call in his book *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (2009) to get back to reading Scripture "with first-century eyes" and "twenty-first century questions," Smith focuses on reading the gospel narratives, Paul's mission, and the Book of Revelation in their historical and cultural contexts. Drawing from extensive scholarship and his experience as pastor, theologian, and teacher in the UK and as missionary in Nigeria, Smith seeks to build a hermeneutical bridge to our globalized world and address important questions related to the Global South and the global scope of God's redemptive work in Christ. This book aims to contribute to understanding how the dynamic message of Christ might be liberated to be heard as genuinely good news today, provided there is willingness to face opposition from a world resistant to the exposure of its injustices.

lens of disability can open up fresh readings of the text. Luke includes several encounters that Jesus has with particular individuals that we don't find in the other Gospels. The bent-over woman in Luke 13:10–17 is one of them.

> Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. [11] And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. [12] When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability." [13] And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. [14] But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." [15] Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? [16] And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" [17] As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.[41]

Mikeal C. Parsons has argued that Luke deliberately includes physiognomic accounts that are unique to his story in order "to subvert their usual moral and spiritual associations" and to point his readers to the liberating message of the gospel.[42]

Physiognomy is the study of outward, bodily characteristics to discover inner characteristics of temperament, or point to a person's ethnic origin. In Greek and Roman times, this was a very popular area of study. Drawing on Parsons's insights, Yong uses a "hermeneutic of physiognomy" to read this account of Luke 13.

The bent-over woman has been set free by Jesus and her salvation reflects the subversion of established conventions of power on at least three levels:

- *physiognomic*: a bent-over figure triumphs over one who is standing straight (the synagogue leader).
- *gender*: a woman's rights trumps male authority, even when the latter is backed up by the entire synagogue and sabbatical tradition.
- *social acceptability*: the woman praises God and goes home. However, the synagogue leader and his colleagues were put to shame and the crowd rejoices in all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing.

> In Lukan hands, the gospel subverts the physiognomic stereotypes and expectations of the first century Mediterranean world so that even "crippled" and spiritually oppressed people like this woman are included among the new people of God. *The disability perspective would rejoice not just because what was bent is now straight, but because God intervened to save and liberate this woman from the oppressive social forces in her world.*[43]

The accounts of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10) and especially of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) are similarly subversive. It is worth quoting Yong at length here because the points he makes illustrate the hermeneutical issues:

> Parsons' hermeneutic of subversive physiognomy, distilled from the Lukan narrative, suggests that the redemption of the people of God would include people like the eunuch and Zacchaeus, not "fixed" so that they can conform to our social standards of beauty and desirability, but just as they are, precisely as a testimony to the power of God to save all of us "normal" folk from our discriminatory attitudes, inhospitable actions, and exclusionary social and political forms of life. Just as Jesus accepted the socially despised and short-statured (physically defective) Zacchaeus, so the early church accepted the physically impaired eunuch, according to Luke's record. It is true that in many other cases, Jesus and the apostles healed the sick and "disabled" by the power of the Spirit. However, in these two cases, Jesus pronounced the arrival of salvation to Zacchaeus's household (Luke 19:9) and Philip baptised the eunuch (Acts 8:38) without any reversal of their physical conditions. In these liberating and subversive stories, we find another ironic Lukan reversal: the redemption of disability doesn't necessarily consist in the healing of disabilities but involves the removal of those barriers—social, structural, economic, political, and religious/theological —which hinder those people with temporarily able bodies from welcoming and being hospitable to people with disabilities! Hence it is that Luke's physiognomic hermeneutic results in an inclusive vision of the redemption of Israel and the reign of God.[44]

Conclusion: What does the gospel of liberation bring to people with disabilities?

a. Dignity: As created in the image of God

Donna Jennings' reflections on identifying the image of God in the humanity of her autistic son's complex needs are deeply challenging. In her article in *Mission Round Table*, Donna writes:

> Pivotal in my own search for theological understanding was to seek out the shape of *imago Dei* integral to Micah. Arguably, orthodox Christian theology limits our understanding of the person, character, and capacity of God, which is formulated according to the criteria and experience of an able-bodied, able-minded humanity … Within this framework our systematic theology volumes generally locate the "image of God" in humanity under the categories of being logical/rational, having capacity and desire for relationship, and enjoying a level of creativity—none of which can be easily defined in my son! By limiting *imago Dei* to criteria experienced in a humanity exclusive of disability, the Christian church effectively implies that the image of God can be diminished in the presence of profound disability … Could it be that Micah's vulnerability points us to another aspect of the divine character and *modus operandum*, highlighting that God chose to make himself vulnerable, in creation, in the cross, and in the church? Can Micah's high level of dependency point us to an understanding of the divine beyond independent, perfect, powerful transcendency, and towards his character of dependency outlined in the Triune community?[45]

We must be clear that people with disabilities are created in the image of God. Neither Zacchaeus nor the eunuch are "healed" of their physical "defectiveness". As Yong says, "This is good news from a disability perspective

as it reflects their inclusion among the people of God *just as they are*."[46]

b. New life: In Christ and in the church

In Luke 14:15–24 we find the "Parable of the Great Banquet". In this account, we see that God's kingdom is by nature inclusive; that the gospel is an inclusive gospel. Luke 14:15–24, in particular, points us to the inclusion of disabled persons in the community of the kingdom.

What does it mean for the local church to be a community of the kingdom in such a way that it embraces those who are so often on the periphery of society and recognizes people with disabilities as an integral part of the body of Christ?[47] The time-lapse video of a painting by Hyatt Moore powerfully illustrates the ecclesiological message of the Great Banquet for today's churches.[48]

In the 1970s, Lesslie Newbigin said that people with disabilities are "utterly indispensable to the Church's authentic life" and he characterized people with disabilities not as "a problem to be solved" but as "trustees of a blessing without which the Church cannot bless the world."[49]

Indispensable to this discussion of inclusion are Paul's reflections on the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. Paul challenges us about not holding a "them and us" attitude which leads to division and exclusion, and to embrace the counter-cultural way of the kingdom by recognizing that "those who seem to be weak, are indispensable" (1 Cor 12:12–27) and require special honour, dignity, and respect. However, it is too often the case that even where churches and organizations do include those with disabilities,

> the ministry is generally directed *from* the strong and able *to* the weak and disabled, based on the one-sided premise that people with disabilities need the church. Engagement with the world of disability has been one strongly shaped by paternalism, denying the individual any contributory role in the body of Christ, any responsibility as an image bearer, defining them merely as the recipient of others' strength.[50]

c. Participation: By the Spirit in the church's witness to the gospel

In our churches and mission agencies, there is a valid place for ministries *to* and *for* people with disabilities. But our witness will be deficient if we fail to recognize the immense importance of developing ministries *with* and *from* people with disabilities. The slogan of the American disability rights movement is highly pertinent to the church and mission scene: "nothing about us without us."

In the working out of God's transforming mission, God's Spirit gifts all his people in different ways, including people with intellectual disabilities in our church communities. What does this perspective mean for our understanding of witness? Consider this story about Megan, told by Ben Conner.

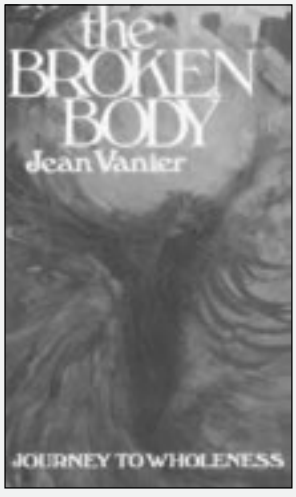
> Megan, who has a significant intellectual impairment, has been coming to church with our family. She can't read the hymnal so she makes "musical noises" while we sing. She can't remember the Apostles Creed, so she makes appropriate sounds in rhythm with the congregation's recitation. She sits through sermons but can't follow the logic of them even when they are reduced to three simple points. Nonetheless, she is a part of the community and evokes peace, love, and goodwill from others in the congregations. She has an intuitive sense that she belongs to this community and that this community belongs to Jesus. So connected is she, that she invited a friend of hers, who happens to have Down's syndrome, to come be a part of the community. Seth has been coming ever since and was baptized last month. As it turns out, Megan is a more effective evangelist than I, and she lacks all of the capacities (rational capacity, reasoning skills, social skills, etc.) that one would expect from an effective evangelist … Within the limits of her capacities, Megan exercised her agency and bore the witness of the Spirit.[51]

For the church to have a credible witness in society, it is not more separate programs for people with disabilities that are needed, but for society to see that people with disabilities are playing a full and integrated part in the life and witness of the church community. For societies across East Asia, that would be a truly counter-cultural and prophetic witness.

d. Advocacy: The church "speaking out for those who cannot speak"[52]

The gospel of liberation is good news for people with disability because the people of God, who are called to freedom (Gal 5:1, 13–14), are called to exercise that freedom *for others*—loving their neighbor as themselves which includes advocating for those in need, speaking out for those who cannot speak, giving voice to those silenced by society.

As Paul Chaney's research highlights, many of the persons with disabilities in Southeast Asia, "are currently denied their human rights … 'common concerns include impunity for serious rights violations … [and] the ill treatment and poor legal protection of … persons with disabilities'."[53]



The Broken Body: Journey to Wholeness

Jean Vanier. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999.

In this short, poetic collection of his thoughts, Vanier examines the roots of brokenness in the Jewish and Christian traditions and reflects on the incarnational life of Jesus. He leads readers gently to see what it means to be human and how we are all broken and disabled in some way and in need of healing. He goes on to show how God's healing comes to us and to the poor and broken—those whom society marginalizes and do not value—as we come to understand that they not only have so much of his love but can also reveal this to us.

The message of the Bible is clear about how the church must reflect the love and justice of God in exercising practical love and justice to those in need.[54] That includes doing justice in terms of exposing and resisting that which oppresses and exploits the weak and the vulnerable, and seeking transformation of the structural imbalances and maladjustments in society that result in many of those with disabilities across many parts of East Asia being hidden from society's view and their voices being silenced.

The church has an important part to play in demonstrating solidarity with the disabled; in advocating in such ways that "involves fighting alongside them, those who care for them and their families, for inclusion and equality, both in society and in the Church."[55]

e. Agency: As channels of transformation and healing

Authentic fellowship with sisters and brothers in Christ becomes transformative when we recognize that we ourselves have something to receive and learn from those who *seem* weak but who are actually agents of the Spirit's transformation in our lives.

When we open up our lives and our churches and our mission agencies to the vulnerable, to those who *seem* weak—to the disabled—our paradigms of self-sufficiency and success are challenged, and we become transformed in having a renewed compassion for people both within and outside of the church. As the late Jean Vanier put it:

> If you enter into relationship with a lonely or suffering person you will discover something else: that it is you who are being healed. The broken person will reveal to you your own hurt and the hardness of your heart, but also how much you are loved. Thus the one you came to heal becomes your healer.[56]

Whatever our ministry context or OMF responsibilities, we can surely affirm this call to action from *The Cape Town Commitment* and in so doing proclaim the gospel of liberation for people with disabilities:

- Let us rise up as Christians worldwide to reject cultural stereotypes, for as the Apostle Paul commented, "we no longer regard anyone from a human point of view" (2 Corinthians 5:16). Made in the image of God, we all have gifts God can use in his service. We commit both to minister to people with disabilities, and to receive the ministry they have to give.

- We encourage church and mission leaders to think not only of mission *among* those with a disability, but to recognize, affirm, and facilitate the missional calling of believers *with* disabilities themselves as part of the Body of Christ.

- We are grieved that so many people with disabilities are told that their impairment is due to personal sin, lack of faith, or unwillingness to be healed. We deny that the Bible teaches this as a universal truth (John 9:1–3). Such false teaching is pastorally insensitive and spiritually disabling; it adds the burden of guilt and frustrated hopes to the other barriers that people with disabilities face.

- We commit ourselves to make our churches places of inclusion and equality for people with disabilities and to stand alongside them in resisting prejudice and in advocating for their needs in wider society.[57] **MRT**

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[1] John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 2001), 108.

[2] John Corrie makes this comment in *Mission in Context: Explorations Inspired by J. Andrew Kirk*, eds. John Corrie and Cathy Ross (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 67.

[3] John Corrie, "Evangelicals and Liberation Theology," in *Mission in Context*, 61–76.

[4] John Coffey, "To Release the Oppressed: Reclaiming a Biblical Theology of Liberation," *Jubilee Centre Cambridge Papers* 18 (December 2009), http://www.jubilee-centre.org/to-release-the-oppressed-reclaiming-a-biblical-theology-of-liberation-by-john-coffey/ (accessed 24 May 2019).

[5] In this paper I refer to liberation "theologies" rather than "theology" because there are various expressions of liberation theology. For instance, liberation theologies constructed from a Catholic context are different from those that have arisen in a Protestant one. As Corrie points out, "they have different historical trajectories, different approaches to scripture, and different experiences of political engagement." Corrie, *Mission in Context*, 63.

[6] José Miguez-Bonino, "Theology and Liberation," *International Review of Mission* 61, no. 241 (1972): 68, quoted in Orlando E. Costas, "Evangelism and The Gospel of Salvation," *International Review of Mission* 63, no. 249 (1974): 27.

[7] Corrie and Ross, *Mission in Context*, 66.

[8] Costas "Evangelism and the Gospel of Salvation," 28.

[9] David Smith, *Liberating the Gospel: Translating the Message of Jesus in a Globalised World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2017), 28.

[10] Smith, *Liberating the Gospel*, 54.

[11] Scott Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 147.

[12] Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission*, 148.

[13] John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), 22.

[14] C. René Padilla, "Jesus' Galilean Option and the Mission of the Church", 1, https://www.micahnetwork.org/sites/default/files/doc/library/rene_padilla_galilean_option.pdf (accessed 24 May 2019).

[15] Padilla, "Jesus' Galilean Option," 2.

[16] Orlando E. Costas, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelisation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 61, quoted in Padilla, "Jesus' Galilean Option," 3.

[17] The orientation towards the periphery is a dynamic and changing space. A sustained focus on those on the margins may well result in those communities and ministries moving towards the centre, benefiting from the increased influence and socio-economic transformations that can come from "redemptive lift". But in those shifts and transformations an attentiveness to Scripture will keep on orientating us to those who, in whatever situation, are on the periphery, and those on the periphery will have a kingdom impact on those at the centre. This is what Costas means when he talks about the particularity of the periphery informing all and each evangelizing context, wherever and among whomever that might be.

[18] The World Health Organization defines disability in these terms: "Disabilities is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.
"Disability is thus not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers." https://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en/ (accessed 28 May 2019).
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that "disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." Preamble, point (e), https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf (accessed 28 May 2019).
The WHO elaborates further that, "Defining disability as an interaction means that 'disability' is not an attribute of the person. Progress on improving social participation can be made by addressing the barriers which hinder persons with disabilities in their day to day lives." World Health Organization, *World Report on Disability* (Geneva: World Health Organization Press, 2011), 4, https://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/chapter1.pdf (accessed 28 May 2019).

[19] Paul Chaney, "Comparative Analysis of Civil Society and State Discourse on Disabled People's Rights and Welfare in Southeast Asia 2010–2016," *Asian Studies Review* 41, no. 3 (2017): 405–423. My italics.

[20] The Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town*

Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action, The Lausanne Movement (Peabody, MA: Henrickson, 2011): 44, https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment (accessed 24 May 2019).

[21] Jayakumar Christian, "A Prophetic Presence in the Margins," *Transformation* 36, no. 2 (2019): 53.

[22] Manuel Aguilar, *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology*, vol. 3 (London: SCM, 2008), 11, quoted in Corrie and Ross, *Mission in Context*, 65, fn 18.

[23] Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 253–54.

[24] Tearfund, *Theology of Jubilee* (2018), https://www.tearfund.org/~/media/files/wewontstop/theologyofjubilee (accessed 24 May 2019).

[25] Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 289–323.

[26] Paul Hertig, "The Jubilee Mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Reversals of Fortunes," *Missiology* 26 (1998): 176–7, quoted in Wright, *The Mission of God*, 301.

[27] J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 106.

[28] Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 12. Yong writes of how we must overcome our "normate biases" when reading the Bible. This is about "unexamined prejudices that non-disabled people have toward disability and toward people who have them. These assumptions function normatively so that the inferior status of people with disabilities is inscribed into our consciousness."

[29] The Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment*, 44.

[30] J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?*, 106.

[31] Christian, "A Prophetic Presence in the Margins," 54.

[32] John Swinton, "Disability Theology," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Ian McFarland, David Ferguson, Karen Kilby, and Iain Torrance, eds. (London: CUP, 2010): 140–1.

[33] http://www.ocms.ac.uk.

[34] https://www.tioassociates.org. As explained on their webside: "Tiō is a Classical Greek word meaning 'to honour', 'respect', 'lift up' or 'advance'. Used within the biblical imagery of 'body' (1 Cor 12) it conveys the importance of the weakest and most vulnerable people within church life, faith communities and wider society. The weaker parts of the 'body' are indispensable. At the heart of Tiō is a passion to 'honour the indispensable'."

[35] Benjamin Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring Missiology Through the Lens of Disability Studies* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018), 38.

[36] Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness*, 45.

[37] Conference details and resources can be found here: https://www.beyondtheboundaries.net.

[38] Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, 13.

[39] Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, 13.

[40] Donna Jennings, "Those Who Seem to Be Weak: The Role of Disability within a Missional Framework" in *Mission Round Table* 12, no. 3 (September–December 2017): 30, https://omf.org/blog/2019/03/26/those-who-seem-to-be-weak-the-role-of-disability-within-a-missional-framework/ (accessed 8 July 2019).

[41] NIV (2011).

[42] Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, 64. Yong borrows from Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

[43] Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, 66. My italics.

[44] Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, 69.

[45] Jennings, "Those Who Seem to Be Weak," 31–2.

[46] Yong, *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, 67. Italics in the original.

[47] A taste of what this can look like in terms of corporate worship was beautifully and powerfully demonstrated by the London branch of the L'Arche community who were invited to join the *Beyond the Boundaries* conference to facilitate a time of participatory worship. This included Bible readings, liturgy, music, and dance and was for many the highlight of the conference, incorporating the themes of our discussions into a time of joyful and deeply authentic worship.

[48] https://www.hyattmoore.com/videos/luke-14-banquet-time-lapse.

[49] J. E. Lesslie Newbigin, "Not Whole Without the Handicapped," in *Partners in Life: The Handicapped and the Church*, ed. Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1979), 24–5, quoted in Conner, *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness*, 57. As Conner says in his footnote: "Newbigin obviously uses the language of the time to speak about intellectual disability. Years from now, I imagine the language I am using in this text will be dated."

[50] Donna Jennings, "Those Who Seem to Be Weak," 32.

[51] Benjamin Conner, "Don't Disable Your Youth Ministry," Princeton Theological Seminary: The Institute for Youth Ministry, http://iym.ptsem.edu/disability1/ (accessed 24 May 2019).

[52] Proverbs 31:8.

[53] Paul Chaney, "Comparative Analysis," 405.

[54] Exodus 22:21–27; Leviticus 19:33–34 (see Leviticus 19:14 on social compassion for the disabled); Deuteronomy 10:18–19; Isaiah 58:6–9; Amos 5:11–15, 21–24; Psalm 112; Job 31:13–23; Proverbs 14:31; 19:17; 29:7; Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 14:12–14; Galatians 2:10; 2 Corinthians 8–9; Romans 15:25–27; 1 Timothy 6:17–19; James 1:27; 2 :14–17; 1 John 3:16–18.

[55] The Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment*, 44.

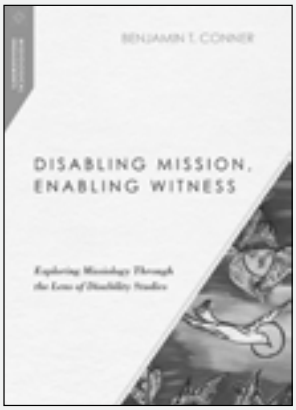
[56] Jean Vanier, *The Broken Body: Journey to Wholeness* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1988), 74.

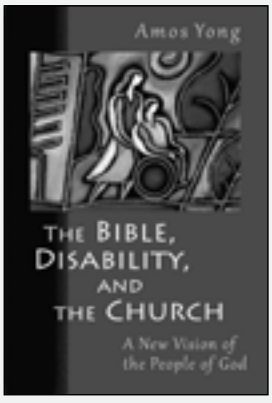
[57] The Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment*, 44.

Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring Missiology Through the Lens of Disability Studies

Benjamin T. Conner. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018.

Though churches may have accommodated the disabled in various ways, they need to consider the pertinent question addressed in this book: whether the able-bodied have come to recognize and appreciate the potential contributions of people with disabilities in the ministry and witness of the church? Conner draws on disability studies to help readers learn to speak about and relate to those with disabilities. More significantly, he brings together missiology and disability studies to stimulate a new conversation between these disciplines and cast a new vision of the entire body of Christ sharing in the witness of the church.





The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God

Amos Yong. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

Yong develops a theology of disability drawn from insights of biblical scholarship on disability and his experience of caring for and engaging with a brother with Down syndrome. He rigorously examines Old and New Testament passages to highlight how disability has often been misconstrued and reinterprets the passages from the perspective of the disabled with the aim of dismantling the bias held by the non-disabled. Yong calls the church to remove the underlying stigma towards the disabled and to become healing and truly inclusive communities that value people with disabilities.

Living with Disability by His Grace

Jonathan Yi-Deh Yao



Yi-Deh's master's thesis in history focuses on the work of the China Inland Mission among the Lisu. After failing to secure a middle school teaching position, Yi-Deh saw God make a way beyond his imagination—giving him the chance to participate in OMF Taiwan's 150th anniversary project in 2014. He then joined OMF Taiwan's literature department where he assists the OMF Chinese communication ministry and serves as the chief editor of *萬族萬民*, the Chinese edition of *East Asia's Millions*. Yi-Deh wrote a book in Chinese, *鷹架任務—內地會在台灣 (Scaffolding: OMF in Taiwan, 2015)*, and he also serves with the youth ministry in his church.

As a disabled person, I was deeply touched by Peter Rowan's article. He has, as stated in the article, "spoken for those who cannot speak." As he shows, the gospel of liberation gives us a lens through which we can see two things more clearly: Jesus' example and the situation faced by disabled people. From this firm biblical basis, we can step further, by God's grace, on a journey towards transformation of life.

My disability

I have lived with Mucopolysaccharidoses (MPS) since I was born. MPS is a metabolic disorder that causes me to lack certain enzymes so that I am not able to break down mucopolysaccharides very well. As the accumulation of the mucopolysaccharides harms some of the organs and skeleton, I am shorter than normal, and have distorted joints and a weaker body. The disease causes me to live life in a "peripheral place". Thank God that Jesus is there. And though our Lord willingly chose to come that way, for me it was not a choice. Even so, I realize that it is actually a blessing for me to walk such a special path. MPS is a progressive condition, so it has brought me different challenges at different stages of my life: some on the physical level, others impacting my adjustment to daily life, and even more on the spiritual level. Thank God that he walks with me when I walk with MPS. I experience his abundant grace and have learned (and am still learning) to rely on him. More than that, when I serve him in church, I find that I am a special vessel, molded by God through everything I have been through.

Living with disabled people

We have learned of Jesus' wonderful model to become weak for others, but we need to confess that it is not easy for Christians to follow perfectly. It is hard to serve in the way Jesus—the incarnate Son—did. We are not careful enough to observe the needs of the disabled. As Christians, our problem is not necessarily a lack of love, but a lack arising from not having the experience and training needed simply to observe. We easily neglect details that hinder disabled people from becoming more integrated into the community. Church buildings often lack accessible facilities. The scheduling and arrangements of outdoor activities and other common routines inadvertently leave people out. And even when we consider helping out in certain areas, we are still blindsided by needs and issues that we have not yet conceived, much less encountered.

Carelessness is a challenge for us; but too much care is another problem. Sometimes we can place too much emphasis on the disability and not enough on the person. Most of my Christian friends wholeheartedly serve those who are disabled—just like Jesus—and that shows a very precious characteristic of his church. Once a need is seen, they use all their strength to help their disabled friends, treating them as a most honored guest. The question is, might this attention make one's disabled friend an object and thereby negate the possibility of their being integrated into the community? It is more challenging to live side by side with disabled people within a community, and not just as with "the one who needs service."

In my college days, I had friends with different kinds of disability. They were not Christians yet, but some of them had joined the Christian fellowship at the university. In the fellowship, there were nice Christians with true faith, passion, and kindness. They cared for their disabled friends and served them a lot more than I had ever done. But I wondered if my disabled friends really became integrated into the community. Though all college students face many

It is definitely important to enhance the ways disabled people can participate in the wider world. That is the touchstone for identification with the community. And though it may be difficult, we should not be afraid to step out, accompany the disabled, and work together with them. After all, in God's eyes, we are all disabled sinners who need his love and salvation.

similar situations and issues, I sometimes found the talks at the Christian fellowship missed the needs of disabled students. For example, when talking about one's career plans, disabled and other students have vastly different considerations. Disabled students often had more constraints due to their special situation, and it was not easy for them to share in such a group. The university I attended is quite a good one, so most of the students are excellent in their academic performance and represented many disciplines. In Taiwan, a "successful student" (just like me!) found it hard to express his weakness to others. I knew that everyone has his own challenge and weakness, but it was just not easy to share openly in such a culture. To get everyone involved in the community, the church must reflect more on the "strong" and the "weak" based on Jesus' example. As Christians, we have to live out a new way that distinguishes us from the conventional thoughts and practices.

We really need God's grace when we build the community. There are so many subtle things that make it difficult to interact in any "symmetrical" basis. Physical differences cause us to experience more asymmetric situations in daily life and make relationships more complicated. Those complications might well cause misunderstandings or even hurts. After all, we are trying to reach out to people in quite different situations from us, and we want them to be members of the body in Christ, not just acquaintances.

My experience with disabled friends

Working with disabled people seems like a cross-cultural issue.

I feel that living with people having different types of disability is like living on different planets. Even a disabled person like me finds it difficult to get out to see disabled friends. I started to pay attention to issues of accessibility because one of my friends uses a wheelchair. I remember that, in our college days, we were forced to make a long detour for lunch because anyone who wanted to cross the wide road separating our campus from the shops had to make use of an overpass or underpass with only stairs. That was about ten years ago. And while disabled-friendly access in Taiwan has improved greatly in the years since, I believe that disabled people still face challenges in many parts of East Asia.

Since I met that friend, I started to pay attention to whether a restaurant is wheelchair friendly or not—even a few stairs at the restaurant entrance can be a major hurdle. And when we go out together, *I* am the one who goes to the cashier or picks up napkins and utensils—things that others usually do for me. It is very interesting for me to have such a role change. I become more active than he in such locations. But in other places—for example, moving a distance from one place to another—it is easier for him to go by wheelchair than for me to go with my barely-walking legs. Disability is thus a relative idea.

To a degree, I feel God gave me a special gift to accompany my disabled friends. As disabled people, though we live on "different planets", we encounter similar experiences: the challenges of daily life, feelings of loneliness, issues pertaining to self-identification, and more. In addition, we experience the "unfriendly situation" together when we walk on the streets through the "ups and downs." Our similar feelings lay a broad foundation for building our friendship.

His grace makes the difference

So, how can churches minister to and with these special friends? Should we conclude that only disabled people can reach the disabled? Absolutely not! Rather, we should see it as a cross-cultural ministry that requires us to transcend our own barriers to embrace and walk side by side with other parts of the body in Christ.

My own life is a testimony. Though I was born in a Christian family, it was still an "already but not yet" journey for my family, my church, and my friends in fellowship to learn to walk together. Thank God for putting so many great people around me. But there are still challenges for us because we are not perfect. In fact, sometimes we make mistakes or even hurt each other in our relationships, whether we intend to or not. When I was a teenager, I often felt my family and church members failed to walk in my shoes to understand my situation, and it sometimes tragically led to great tension. (I hope that I have totally repented!) However, as suffering increases, grace increases all the more. When we put our focus on the work Jesus has done on the cross, we see the fact that he bears our sufferings and insufficiency. He filled all the gaps by his personal sacrifice.

We Christians share a foundation that is not just based on personal feelings that are similar. Thank God that we have Jesus Christ as the foundation so that we can be one community, the body of Christ, and we can bravely invite others to join in the process of transformation and healing. As I look back, I have to thank God that my family and church did not treat me with too much privilege. For on the one hand, such treatment might have reflected the reality that, in Taiwan, special education was just sprouting during 1980s to the early 2000s. And on the other hand, it meant that participation was a very natural thing for me—the thing I ought to do. Physically and mentally, I was mostly just within the range I could bear, a reality that helped shape my personal character in an open and positive direction. Though it is complicated to discern how to handle the degrees and ways in which to do this, it is definitely important to enhance the ways disabled people can participate in the wider world. That is the touchstone for identification with the community. And though it may be difficult, we should not be afraid to step out, accompany the disabled, and work together with them. After all, in God's eyes, we are all disabled sinners who need his love and salvation. **MRT**

Presenting the Good News as a Blessing:
A Case Study among Filipino Folk Catholics

Andy Smith



Andy Smith is OMF's International Coordinator for Evangelization. He completed an MA in missions at Columbia International University. His most recent book, *The Majesty of Jesus*, explores what the Gospel of John says about Jesus and about belief.

Bikolanos' background

On a short visit to the Bikol Region of the Philippines, a person would notice its beauty. The six provinces abound in beaches, coconut trees, rolling hills, and rice fields. However, those who stay longer would almost certainly experience a natural disaster since the region is home to three active volcanoes and twenty typhoons blow through it during a typical year. The blessings of its geography cannot be separated from the curses of the same.

General histories of the Philippines state that peoples of the islands have long sought leaders who could protect and provide for them. Because of their location, the Bikolanos almost certainly did so. They looked for leaders who could help them maximize the blessings and neutralize the curses. They also looked for similar assistance from the spirit world. Long ago, they believed in a chief god who lived in heaven. They trusted in this good and just being to defend them against the head evil spirit.

A historian reports that "The ancient Bikols believed … in the protective power of the anitos or spirits of dead ancestors. As intercessors and guardians, they were represented in statuettes called lagdong, larawan or tagno and placed in grottoes or moog or in a public place most frequently visited in a village, according to the social rank of the deceased."[1] The Bikolanos believed that the chief god and the spirits would bless those who honored them. It should also be noted that they worked hard and lived in a fertile location. As a result, their "industriousness and nature's bounty enabled them to become one of the wealthiest inhabitants of precolonial Philippines."[2]

However, the research of the same Bikolano historian found "various Bikol oral accounts focusing on a curse allegedly cast against the Bikol people."[3] They indeed lived in a world of blessings and curses.

In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan visited the islands. In 1565, Spain began colonizing them. The foreigners introduced Roman Catholicism and encouraged the people to move to certain locations where they could more easily teach and govern them. Although most of the population converted, their hope of protection and provision merely shifted, in visible and public rituals, from spirits of dead ancestors to Catholic saints. Mary, the mother of Jesus, became the first choice of many as the mediator through whom to send requests to God.

The Bikolanos continued practicing their traditional religion, though in a more hidden way. Some Catholic researchers claim that this syncretism was the result of a lack of priests. One study concluded that since "the number of [Roman Catholic] missionaries dealing with the widely scattered settlements of Filipinos was small, it was difficult to root out pagan practices and beliefs. The so-called 'folk religion' has thus persistently troubled the Catholic hierarchy in the Philippines."[4]

Disarmament added to the Bikolanos' challenges. Spanish officials confiscated their weapons and promised to protect them. However, they lacked the resources to keep their word. Being defenseless, the Bikolanos were occasionally attacked and raided by other peoples. Furthermore, "The Franciscan missionaries taught the people humility and self-abnegation. Poverty, a cherished virtue of the order, must have been impressed on the people as a blessed thing."[5]

Over time, "It seems … that for the rural folk in the remote Bikol barrios the security that Christianity promised to bring them has not been met, that the

Christian faith has not at all given them the strength or ability to endure life."[6]

Time did not reverse the situation. Neither did the service of the Catholic priests. Rather, "By the mid-17th century the quality of friars coming into the region had greatly deteriorated … Among the complaints were the charging of exorbitant fees, the compulsory service by young ladies in the convents, and the friars' involvement in business transactions."[7] Instead of leading their flocks to abundant life in Christ, some priests oppressed and impoverished them.

In recent decades, the Roman Catholic Church has analyzed what it could have done better. In 1991, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines concluded "that the Philippines had been Christianized, but not evangelized, at least not enough."[8] Rebecca Cacho, a Filipina Catholic professor of theology, adds: "Since Christianity has been received without an intelligible grasp of the faith, one may wonder whether the faith has been fully accepted."[9]

My experience echoes their conclusions. Although some Filipino Catholics understand and treasure the good news of Jesus, many have never been evangelized in a meaningful way. Few of the Bikolanos I served knew that Jesus' death makes it possible for them to be forgiven. Rather, they believed that their baptism had washed away their original sin and that their time in purgatory will pay for the further sins they commit. To them, Jesus is an example to follow, not the Redeemer, Savior, Mediator, or Lord.

My introduction to Catholics

I grew up a Protestant. While a few of my friends were Roman Catholic, we never discussed our beliefs, partly because our fathers' faith had not yet become ours. It was also because we assumed our beliefs were basically the same. I came to faith in my final year in high school. Over the next ten years, I learned more and more about sharing the good news with others.

It was not until I arrived in the Philippines in 1989, however, that I gained significant experience in sharing the gospel with Catholics. I lived in a Tagalog area during my first two years and among Bikolanos for eight years. The great majority of both peoples are folk Catholics.

When people first meet in the Philippines, they often ask each other a set of questions. One of them is, "What's your religion?" The people I met usually replied, "I'm Catholic. What's your religion?" I initially answered "Protestant." Then I learned that most Catholics interpret this label either as a false religion which opposes Catholics or as a religion whose male members smoke, drink, gamble, and keep mistresses. Senior missionaries encouraged me to answer "Born-again Christian" instead. This label led to fewer negative reactions. Nevertheless, either answer often prodded them to ask a follow-up question: "What do you think about Mary and the saints?"



I had never been asked such questions before. My gut sense was that the "wrong" answer might end our conversation right there. I struggled for several years to know what to do.

I first experimented with a theological answer. "Actually, Paul calls all disciples of Jesus *saints*. Even the church in Corinth, many of whom were leading carnal lives, he greeted as saints." This answer never satisfied them, which showed me there was something behind their question that I did not fully understand.

While learning language and culture, I discovered that Filipinos love humor. In fact, a funny statement can remove the tension in an awkward situation. It can turn a potential argument into a positive conversation. With this in mind, I tested a humorous answer to their question about saints: "I think the saints are fine people. Why, I'm Saint Andrew." Although this comment sparked laughter, it rarely led to a quality conversation.

A few years later, I tried a practical approach. I first ensured that the folk Catholic agrees with me that Mary, in heaven, is a person; she did not become something more. I then asked, "If twenty people were standing around you and making requests of you at the same time, how many of them would you hear clearly and understand?" They usually replied, "Probably none of them." I continued, "At any minute, there could be a million Catholics seeking to get their requests to God through Mary. Although in heaven, she's still a person. How many of those million would she hear clearly and understand?" This question made them think, but it never led to a deeper discussion.

Eventually, the Holy Spirit led me to a constructive answer. This tact helped me enter into many meaningful conversations. It also allowed me to start Bible studies with dozens of them and their households. I have taught it to others who now do the same thing.

Following is an example of what these conversations often sound like.

Talking about Mary

Witness (W): "What's your religion?"

Folk Catholic (FC): "Catholic. What's yours?"

W: "I'm also a Christian. Wonderful. Say, what do you think about Mary? Wasn't she blessed?"

FC: "Yes, indeed. Everyone knows she was blessed."

W: "Surely millions of Jewish women had longed to be the mother of the Messiah. But only one could be his mother. And Mary was that one."

The folk Catholic agrees and then mentions another way in which Mary was blessed. The two continue to exchange such statements. Some folk Catholics make extra-biblical or even heretical statements about Mary. The witness ignores these comments in order to avoid entering into a debate so early in the discussion.

Eventually, the two have no additional statements to make about Mary. The witness then makes the conversation personal.

W: "Mary was indeed blessed. How about you? Are you and your household blessed?"

FC: "No, we are not."

W: "Why do you think that is?"

Most do not answer. The look upon their faces, however, communicates that they wish they knew why they are not blessed and what they can do to reverse their situation. The witness opens a Bible to Luke 11:27–28 and asks them to read it. If not carrying one, he/she recites the verses to them.

FC: "As Jesus said these things, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!' But he said, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!'"[10]

W: "What did the woman shout?"

FC: "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!"

W: "To whom was she referring?"

FC: "Mary."

W: "Yes, as we were just discussing, Mary was blessed to be the mother of the Savior. Did Jesus agree with the woman in the crowd and say something like, 'Yes, ma'am, my mother is blessed'?"

FC: "No, he didn't say that."

W: "Well then, according to Jesus, who is blessed?"

FC: "Those who hear the word of God



and keep it. In fact, it sounds like Jesus said that such people are more blessed than Mary."

W: "Do you and your household hear the word of God on a regular basis?"

Their heads usually drop towards their chests, a confession that they do not.

W: "Do you and your household keep the word of God? Do you obey it on a daily basis?"

They usually shake their head, admitting that they fail to follow it.

W: "Could that explain why your household is not blessed?"

FC: "Yes."

W: "I would be happy to visit your household once a week so that you can listen to the word of God regularly and learn to obey it. Is this something you would be interested in?"

Many people respond positively. The witness then leads them in a weekly Bible study using the set of stories and questions below. Before we look at those, I will first describe a second method used to start household Bible studies.

Three Story Method

I wish I had known the Three Story Method during my church planting years. I now teach it to others. In it, the witness aims to share three stories. This is done by engaging a folk Catholic in a discussion and asking the person to tell some of his or her life story—story 1. The witness listens carefully, hoping to spot evidence that God is already at work in the person's life. Then the witness shares a bit about him/herself—story 2. This story describes what the witness was like before coming to faith in Jesus, what he/she discovered that led to a decision to follow Jesus, and the difference knowing Jesus makes in his/her life. In a context of freedom, the witness talks openly about Jesus. In a restricted context, he/she talks about him more vaguely.

Next, the witness asks, "Would you like to hear the story of God?" This question often gets a positive reply. The witness then recites story 3, which is called a Creation to Christ or Creation to Church story. A sample follows.

A long time ago, God made the universe. Of all that he created, people were the most special. He blessed them, placing them in a beautiful garden and relating to them personally.

One day, people were tempted to think that God had withheld a blessing from them. They shamelessly tried to get it. As a result, God sent them out of the garden. They became separated from him.

More and more people were born. They, too, lived apart from God. So he chose a man[11] and promised him, "I will bless you, and I will bless all families of the earth through you." That man believed God. As a result, God blessed him.

In the following years, people sought blessings apart from God. So, he sent them messengers[12] to call them back to him. Occasionally, those messengers announced that God would send a Savior who would bring the greatest blessing.

At just the right time, God sent that Savior. His name is Jesus. He performed miracles, healed the sick, and taught with authority. Some believed in him. God blessed them by helping them see the error of their ways and giving them new life.

Others rejected Jesus and had him put to death. Unknown to them, God was working out his plan. Jesus paid the penalty for our seeking blessings apart from God.

Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his followers. He told them that they would receive the Spirit of God who would further bless them. He then returned to heaven. As promised, his followers received the Spirit of God who related to them personally and helped them live the new life.

The same is happening today. God removes the guilt and shame of those who repent of seeking blessings apart from God and believe that Jesus died for them. He also gives them his Spirit who helps them see the error of their ways and live the new life.

I'm one of those people, and I enjoy helping others receive this blessing too. Is this something you and your family would be interested in?

Material for the Bible studies

Whether talking about Mary or using the Three Story Method, the witness's desire is to start Bible studies with entire households. We want them to acknowledge their need and then to discover what the Bible teaches about being blessed. Doing so aligns well with Os Guinness's statement that "It is when the human heart is most fully aware of its longings, dilemmas and sorrows that it can see the profundity and awe of the answers that Jesus offers, and that Jesus is."[13]

Once a household agrees to a weekly Bible study, the witness leads them through a three-month series. Each study lasts about one hour. Listed below are the thirteen lessons I initially used (only portions of most of the chapters were studied). In each, we especially looked for the sins that people committed, evidence of God's righteousness, teaching about judgment, and promises or prophecies about a coming Savior.

1. Creation Blessings and the Curse of Sin (Genesis 1–5; Hebrews 11:1–6)
2. God Wiped Out the Evil (Genesis 6–9; 11; Hebrews 11:7)
3. God will Bless All Peoples through the Offspring of Abraham (Genesis 12; 18–19; 21–22; Hebrews 11:8–19)
4. God will Bless All Peoples through the Offspring of Isaac, Jacob, and Judah (Genesis 25–28; 49; Hebrews 11:20–22)
5. Israel was Redeemed by the Blood of Lambs (Exodus 1–3; 12; 14; Hebrews 11:23–29)
6. People Need a Mediator between Them and God (Exodus 20; 28; 32; Leviticus 10; Hebrews 5:1–4)
7. Blood Must be Shed for People to be Forgiven (Leviticus 16; 23; Deuteronomy 18:15–20; Hebrews 9:16–22)
8. People Do What They Want to Do (Joshua 2; 6; Judges 2; 21:25; 1 Samuel 1; Hebrews 11:30–31)
9. An Offspring of David will Reign Forever (1 Samuel 17:12; 2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 6; 8:41–43; 11; Hebrews 11:32–34)
10. In the New Covenant, God will Forgive His People (Jeremiah 1; 31:31–34; Ezra 1; Hebrews 8:7–13)
11. Is Jesus the Fulfillment of the Promises of God? (Luke 1; 3; 4; 8; 22–23)
12. Jesus Is Indeed the Fulfillment of the Promises of God (Luke 24; Acts 2; 2 Corinthians 1:19–20; Hebrews 2:14; 1 Peter 1:18–20; Revelation 5:1–10)
13. Blessed are Those who Believe in Jesus (Matthew 16:13–17; Luke 11:27–28; Acts 3:11–26; Romans 4:1–8; Galatians 3:6–9; Hebrews 2:1–4; James 1:22–25; Revelation 22:14–16)

Revised material for the Bible studies

God mightily used the inductive Bible study series described above. However, I was only able to equip a handful of young believers to use it with their friends. Others told me it was too complicated for them to lead, which started me on a search for a more reproducible way to cover similar material. After several experiments, I settled on the following. The group discusses one passage at each of their gatherings. They read it a few times. Then the facilitator leads a discussion of it using the questions below. A few of the passages lack answers for one or more of these questions. Where that is the case, the facilitator skips those questions during that discussion.

Questions

1. In this narrative, what is said about God?
2. What is said about people?
3. What did or will God do to punish those who sinned?
4. What did or will God do to save people from their sins?
5. Who did or will God bless? Why them?

Passages

1. Creation (Genesis 1:1–31)
2. Adam and Eve's Sin (Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–24)
3. Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1–16)
4. Noah and the Flood (Genesis 6:9–22; 7:6–12, 17–24; 8:20–22; 9:1–7, 18–27)
5. Abram's Call (Genesis 12:1–20)
6. Isaac and His Sons, Esau, and Jacob (Genesis 25:19–26; 26:1–5; 28:10–17)
7. The Israelites' Exit from Egypt (Exodus 12:21–38 and 14:1–31)
8. God's Promise to David (2 Samuel 7:1–17 and 23:1–7)
9. Jesus' Birth (Luke 1:26–38; 2:1–7, 25–38)
10. Jesus' Death (Luke 22:1–6 and 23:32–46)
11. Jesus' Resurrection (Luke 24:1–7, 36–49)
12. Those Who Believe (Galatians 3:6–10 and Matthew 16:13–17)
13. Those Who Have Turned from Their Wicked Ways (Acts 3:1–26)

The broader questions allow participants to answer from their heart rather than from the passage alone. Such answers help the witness further diagnose where the people are spiritually. As a result, they might compel him/her to add a passage to the series or to emphasize a point in an upcoming study. Or they might urge him/her to review with the group a passage they already discussed which suggests that the person's answer was incorrect.

Bless and blessed

Victor P. Hamilton explains that "There are two verbs in Hebrew meaning 'to bless.' One is *bārak* and the other *'āshar*."[14] The passages in the Bible study material described above only use the first which John N. Oswalt defines as "***to kneel, bless, praise, salute, curse*** (used euphemistically)."[15] It carries the idea of a lesser person kneeling before a greater person to receive a blessing from that greater person. Oswalt continues: "To bless in the OT means 'to endue with power for success, prosperity, fecundity,[16] longevity, etc.'"[17]

Josef Scharbert adds an important point: "But it is particularly clear that the *barukh*-formula, when it is not reduced to empty talk as in Zec. 11:5, is always a manifestation of an intimate relationship with the one for whom it is intended, or an acknowledgement of communion with him; thus it has to do with God's relationship to his people and his worshippers, but especially with Israel's relationship to her God."[18]

Discussing the passages in the Bible study material above, Filipino folk Catholics learn about those whom God blessed. Entire groups, such as creatures in the water (Gen 1:22), birds (Gen 1:22), and humanity (Gen 1:28) were blessed. So were clans, including Noah's (Gen 9:1) and the Levites (Exod 32:29). Key individuals in God's plan, especially Abraham (Gen 12:2; 22:17), received special blessings.

Participants note the repetition of the blessing about being fruitful and multiplying (Gen 1:22, 28; 9:1, 7; 22:17). The responsibilities given to humanity reminded them of our unique place in God's plan (Gen 1:26–29; 9:2–6). They also learn that God put enmity between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring (Gen 3:15), which helps them understand why the world is no longer a peaceful paradise. God's promises to Noah after the flood about providing and protecting (Gen 8:21–22) give them hope.

Then they hear about God's interaction with Abraham. They discover that "the blessing, as God's gift to Israel and to all nations (who are viewed as intimately associated with Israel), predominates over the curse. The turning point … is the promise to Abraham in Gen. 12:2f., by means of which the power of the curse brought about by sin is broken."[19] Clearly, "The final clause is the most comprehensive: 'All tribes of the earth can obtain blessing in you' (alternate trans. of 12:3b; cf. 18:18; 28:14).… It [a history of blessing] includes liberation from vain toil (3:17), wandering (4:11–12), base servitude (9:25), and the destructive chaos of the nations (11:1–9). Thus, Gen. 12:1–3 spans the histories of patriarchs, nation, and humanity with a promise of blessing."[20]

Participants also find several promises or prophecies about a coming Savior. Elderly Jacob announced that "the scepter shall not depart from Judah, … and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples" (Gen 49:10). Moses declared that God would raise up a prophet like him and would put his words in that prophet's mouth (Deut 18:15, 18). Through Nathan, God promised David: "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16).

Throughout the stories, participants learn about a God who is righteous and compassionate. They notice that some people were punished, that some were saved, and that there often seemed to be no works-based reason for the distinction. As a result, they grow in their desire to have a relationship with this gracious God and to be endued with power by him.

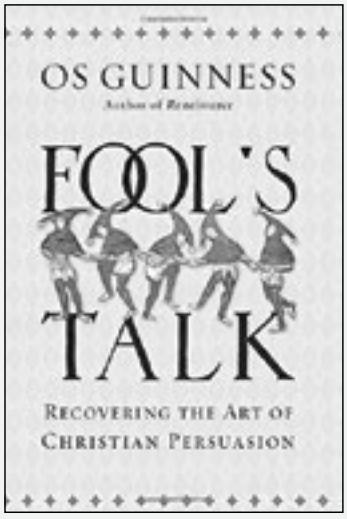
The final passages in the Bible study material come from the New Testament. Hermann Beyer observes that "The NT takes over much of the OT concept of blessing."[21] *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words* notes that "Compared with the fundamental significance of blessing in the OT, the NT gives less prominence to both the concept and the act. The group of words associated with the root *eulog-* occurs 67x in the NT."[22] Allen C. Myers notes that a form of this word "is used to indicate the universal application of Abraham's blessing (Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8; cf. LXX Gen. 12:3; 18:18)."[23]

The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words explains that, "Of NT writers Paul uses the concept of blessing most deliberately and gives it its new Christological form. (i) In Gal. 3:8 he cites Gen. 12:3b: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' The fulfillment of the blessing promised to Abraham is now seen as God's redeeming act in Christ."[24]

The Bible study material described above includes portions of Acts 3 and Galatians 3. In an early sermon, Peter quoted the final phrase of Genesis 12:3 and then taught that God wants to bless the listeners by turning each of them from their wickedness (Acts 3:26). Paul declared that "God … preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" Then he clarified who enters into this blessing: "So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal 3:8–9).

The New Testament passages in the material described above also use the second Greek word for bless. Myers summarizes its meaning: "Gk. *makários* occur[s] primarily with the sense 'happy, fortunate,' illustrating the joy of life unmarred by care, labor, or death. Generally found in the blessing formulas, these expressions indicate the subject's having fulfilled certain obligations or stipulations."[25]

Friedrich Hauck helpfully adds that "The special feature of the group μακάριος, μακαρίζειν, μακαρισμός in the NT is that it refers overwhelmingly to the distinctive religious joy which accrues to man from his share in the salvation of the kingdom of God."[26] He



Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion

Os Guinness. Downers Grove: IVP, 2015.

Most cookie-cutter approaches to evangelism and apologetics assume that people are open, interested, and needy for spiritual insight, but increasingly most people are not. The critical need is the capacity to make a convincing case for the gospel to people who are not interested in it. Guinness offers a comprehensive presentation of the art and power of creative persuasion. Actual persuasion requires more than a one-size-fits-all approach—as Guinness notes, "Jesus never spoke to two people the same way, and neither should we." Guinness demonstrates how apologetic persuasion requires both the rational and the imaginative, turning the tables on listeners' assumptions to surprise them with signals of transcendence and the credibility of the gospel.

I needed to change from presenting abstract doctrine from the epistles to facilitating discussions of biblical narratives. As Walter Brueggmann argues, "evangelism means inviting people into these stories as the definitional story of our life, and thereby authorizing people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways."

continues: "A clear difference from the Gk. beatitudes is that all secular goods and values are now completely subsidiary to the one supreme good, the kingdom of God, whether it be that the righteous man may hope for this, is certain of it, has a title to it, or already has a part in it. The predominating estimation of the kingdom of God carries with it a reversal of all customary evaluations."[27]

A form of *makár-* is used in several passages of the Bible study material. After Peter replied that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus declared him blessed (Matt 16:16–17). Paul quoted David's statements that blessed are those whose sins are forgiven (Rom 4:7–8). James taught that the doer of the word "will be blessed in his doing" (Jas 1:25). Similar to Paul, John noted that blessed are those who wash their robes (Rev 22:14).

As Filipino folk Catholics study the set of Bible passages, their concept of blessing gets challenged. First, the passages correct their belief about the source of blessing. Several of the Old Testament passages point to Jesus. Some of the New Testament passages reveal how those promises and prophecies were fulfilled. By doing so, the material communicates Jesus' central role in God's plan of salvation. Through him, God's ultimate blessings are available. The following story illustrates this kind of impact.

My co-worker and I had held an evangelistic Bible study with a family for three years with little fruit. Then I led them in the Bible study material described above. We eventually reached lesson 9. While discussing God's promise to David, the matriarch shouted out, "Now I see! Now I see! It's all about Jesus!" The first eight lessons cover key Old Testament passages but do not mention Jesus by name. They do, however, include promises and prophecies about the coming Savior. During lesson 9, the weight and singular focus of these statements convinced the matriarch that neither Mary nor the Roman Catholic Church is at the center of God's plan of salvation. Instead, Jesus is. God's greatest blessings are available through him alone. The matriarch came to faith that night.

Second, by studying these passages, Filipino folk Catholics gain a fuller understanding of the content of these blessings. Formerly, they believed that security and adequate provisions indicated a family's good standing with the spirits. Lacking them suggested that a clan had offended the spirits and, therefore, were under a curse. The Bible passages show them the bigger story: a cosmic battle rages. As a result, while some blessed people enjoy a relatively comfortable life, others lead a nomadic life, are ridiculed, are oppressed, or suffer in other ways. Nevertheless, they are counted among God's people. Their sins have been forgiven, and he is now working to make them holy.

Third, they learn who the recipients of these blessings are. It shocks most that God blessed certain unworthy Bible characters. This reality teaches them that the gaining of blessings has nothing to do with ancestry, religion, or works. Instead, "those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal 3:9). The ultimate happiness is reserved for those who, by faith, turn to Jesus Christ.

It encourages me that some Filipino Catholics are seeking better ways to present the good news to their own people and are coming to conclusions similar to mine. Dr. Cacho is among them. She believes that the starting point is to recognize that life is difficult, full of hardships and suffering. She therefore suggests that salvation be described as *ginhawa*, "total well being of a person." By it, she means relief from physical suffering and relief from inner suffering, which includes forgiveness and reconciliation.[28] She emphasizes "that salvation in the context of *ginhawa* is a blessing from a loving God who has come to us in Jesus to gift us with salvation by the power of the Spirit."[29]

Conclusion

When I arrived in the Philippines, I thought I knew the gospel well. But the new context forced a broadening of my understanding. I was no longer sharing it with cultural Protestants in the West but with folk Catholics in the Philippines. With the former, the consequence of sin which I had addressed was guilt. The God-given salvation which I had highlighted was forgiveness. With the latter, the consequence of sin which I usually address is separation from God. The aspect of salvation which I emphasize is reconciliation. The change in audience required that I shift from explaining the good news as the way of righteousness to describing it as the way of blessing.

Further, I needed to change from presenting abstract doctrine from the epistles to facilitating discussions of biblical narratives. As Walter Brueggmann argues, "evangelism means inviting people into these stories as the definitional story of our life, and thereby authorizing people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways."[30]

The methods and materials described above invite Filipino folk Catholics into these biblical stories and present them with a new metanarrative. They urge them to turn from the stories of their ancestors and to take hold of these biblical stories. They call them to new life, that is, to enter into the blessing made available to all families of the earth by Abraham's seed, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, above all, these methods and materials exalt Jesus. They point to the One who can redeem sinners from the curse of the law (Gal 3:13). They emphasize the One in whom sinners can be blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph

1:3). Praise God for using them to draw many folk Catholics to himself.

Your context

I hope this paper stirs you to reflect on your sharing of the good news. Perhaps it will cause you to think about what else you can do to share it more clearly and meaningfully in your setting. Following is an example of what the results might look like.

Several years ago, I was asked to facilitate a training event in Japan. Since I knew little about the Japanese, I contacted a handful of people whose efforts had borne fruit among the Japanese. I asked how they share the good news in that context. Based on their replies, I wrote the following Creation to Christ story.

The world is messed up. Relationships are broken. The environment is damaged. Many are suffering. Nearly everyone longs for a better world.

Christians believe that God created a good, wonderful world. He designed it to take care of us, and us to take care of it. Plus, people were made to live together harmoniously and to live harmoniously with God.

But people wanted to be in charge. So, they did a shameful thing: they disobeyed God. As a result, their relationship with him was broken. They started doing mean things and hurting one another which made them feel ashamed. In addition, droughts, earthquakes, famines, and floods began threatening their existence.

God sent messengers to remind them about his way. Occasionally, those messengers announced that he would send a Savior who would make it possible for things to be restored.

At just the right time, God sent him. His name is Jesus. He performed miracles, healed the sick, and taught with authority. As a result, many believed in him and became his followers.

Others rejected Jesus and had him put to death. Unknown to them, God was working out his plan. He put on Jesus the shame of all people. Jesus died on their behalf.

Then, God honored Jesus by raising him from the dead. Jesus appeared to his followers. He told them that they would receive the Spirit of God. This Spirit would change them from the inside out, enabling things to be restored. Jesus then returned to heaven. As promised, his followers received the Spirit.

The same is happening today. God removes the shame of those who believe that Jesus died for them. He honors them by giving them his Spirit who changes them from the inside out. As a result, they again live harmoniously with God. They start learning to live harmoniously with one another again. They begin to take care of the world again. Many things are restored.

I'm one of those people, and I enjoy helping others understand this solution to the world's situation too. Is this something you and your family would be interested in?

I suggested that interested families be led in a study of a set of Bible passages similar to the second (revised) version above. I changed the discussion questions to make them align better with the themes of brokenness and restoration.

Questions

1. According to this story, what is God's design and desire for the world?
2. What does it say is messed up about the world?
3. What did, is, or will God do(ing) to make it possible for things to be restored?
4. What element of this story speaks most powerfully to you? What would it look like for you to live according to it?

The possible variations are endless as we seek to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a world that needs him desperately. What will work best in your context? **MRT**

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[1] Maria Lilia F. Realubit, *Bikols of the Philippines* (Naga City: A.M.S., 1983), 11.
[2] Luis Camara Dery, *From Ibalon to Sorsogon: A Historical Survey of Sorsogon Province to 1905* (Quezon City: New Day, 1991), 26.
[3] Dery, *From Ibalon to Sorsogon*, 6.
[4] Christl Kessler and Jürgen Rüland, *Give Jesus a Hand! Charismatic Christians: Populist Religion and Politics in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2008), 32.
[5] Realubit, *Bikols of the Philippines*, 66.
[6] Realubit, *Bikols of the Philippines,* 85.
[7] Danilo M. Gerona, "The Franciscan Evangelization and the Bicolano Response, 1578–1700, *Kinaadman (Wisdom): A Journal of the Southern Philippines* 12, no. 2 (1990): 108.
[8] Kessler and Rüland, *Give Jesus a Hand*, 83.
[9] Rebecca R. Cacho, "Re-articulating Soteriology Using *Ginhawa* (Total Well Being of Persons) as a Model of an Inculturated Theology of Salvation for Filipinos," in *The Bible in the 21st Century Philippine Context: A Compendium of Papers Presented During the 1st Philippine Bible Forum*, ed. E. B. Ebojo, D. C. Monera, and R. U. Yu (Manila: Philippine Bible Society, 2008), 179.
[10] This and all following Scripture quotations are from the *ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version)*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
[11] If the witness thinks the person knows about Abraham, he/she uses the name. However, if he/she thinks the name could get them sidetracked, its use is avoided.
[12] If the witness thinks the person has a biblical concept of prophets, he/she calls these messengers prophets. However, if he/she thinks the term prophet could be misunderstood, he/she uses messengers. I call them messengers because the first prophet that comes to the mind of many folk Catholics I talk to in the Philippines is Nostradamus.
[13] Os Guinness, *Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 164.
[14] Victor P. Hamilton, "183 אָשַׁר (*'āshar*)," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 80.
[15] John N. Oswalt, "285 בָּרַךְ (*bārak*)," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 132. Emphasis is in the original text.
[16] Fecundity means fertility.
[17] Oswalt, "285 בָּרַךְ (*bārak*)," 132.
[18] Josef Scharbert, "ברך *brk*; בְּרָכָה *b'rākhāh*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, revised edition, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 288.
[19] Scharbert, "ברך *brk*; בְּרָכָה *b'rākhāh*," 306–07.
[20] Verlyn D. Verbrugge, ed., *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 493.
[21] Hermann W. Beyer, "εὐλογέω, εὐλογητός, εὐλογία, ἐνευλογέω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 761.
[22] Verbrugge, ed., *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 494.
[23] Allen C. Myers, "Bless," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 524.
[24] Verbrugge, ed., *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 495.
[25] Myers, "Bless," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, 524.
[26] Friedrich Hauck, "μακάριος, μακαρίζω, μακαρισμός," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1967), 367.
[27] Hauck, "μακάριος, μακαρίζω, μακαρισμός," 368.
[28] Cacho, "Re-articulating Soteriology," 189–90.
[29] Cacho, "Re-articulating Soteriology," 182.
[30] Walter Brueggmann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Stories Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 10.

Sharing the Gospel as a Blessing in Taiwan

A Response to "Presenting the Good News as a Blessing"

Nathan Keller



Nathan Keller (MDiv, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) and his wife, Tina, have served among the Taiwanese working class since 2010. He is a ministry team leader and also a Daniel Facilitator (Language Supervisor) for the Taiwan Field. He is the father of three primary school sons.

One of my great joys in ministry is being able to help Taiwanese Christians learn how to share the gospel with others. Every time I do so, I begin by sharing what the gospel is. I tell people that the gospel has four crucial elements. If one of these elements is excluded, then the gospel message is diluted. The four elements of the gospel message are the biblical explanations of the following: who God is, sin and its consequences, God's plan of salvation through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, and the response of faith. I am aware that some who read this article may define the gospel message in slightly different ways, but we would all agree that these four elements are essential.

When I saw the subtitle of Andy Smith's article, "Presenting the Good News as a Blessing," my mind at first wondered if I was about to read about a diluted gospel message that focused on believing in God only because of the benefits that it would bring to the believer. On the contrary, in his article, Andy presents a robust gospel message, and he uses the cultural value of "blessing" as a relatable theme in order to make the gospel message meaningful to those to whom it is proclaimed.

It is important to note that our role as evangelists is to faithfully proclaim the gospel. We cannot save anybody's soul. As highlighted by John Stott, "To 'evangelize' in the New Testament usage does not mean to win converts, as it usually does when we use the word. Evangelism is the announcement of the good news, irrespective of the results."[1] We could add that as we announce the gospel message, we must do so in a way that is meaningful for our audience.

In this short article I plan to briefly review Andy's paper and then show how using the theme of "blessing" can be a useful evangelistic tool in Taiwan. I will end with a few concluding remarks.

Reflections on "Presenting the Good News as a Blessing"

Andy knows the audience of his gospel proclamation very well. He begins the paper by explaining who the Bikolano people are and why the theme of "blessing" is a rich and deep cultural value. He then explains how so many of the Bikolano people have a high respect and awareness of Catholicism but do not have a proper understanding of the gospel message and how it relates to them personally and can bring them true blessing.

Andy then explains two fruitful methods of pre-evangelism that he has effectively used in his ministry, both of which focus on the highly-valued cultural theme of "blessing." The first method is talking about Mary. Using this method, the evangelist opens a simple discussion that seeks common ground with a person, bridges to a theological discussion, and then moves to a personal conversation. This then leads to an invitation to study more about what Jesus says makes a person blessed: hearing and doing the word of God (Luke 11:28).

The second pre-evangelistic method is the Three Story Method. In this method, the evangelist first encourages the non-Christian to share his or her own life story. Then, the evangelist shares his or her own life story. In the third story, the evangelist shares God's story, which is also called the "Creation to Christ" story. The sample "Creation to Christ" story that Andy shares in this paper is itself a robust gospel presentation. I have noted the essential gospel elements in this story. In Andy's sample, *God* is mentioned sixteen times. *Sin* (seeking blessing apart from God) is mentioned seven times. *Salvation* (here shared in terms of "blessing") is mentioned twelve times. That a *response of faith* is necessary for blessing to be experienced is mentioned four times, including an invitation to receive this blessing from God.

It is important for us to remember that God can use our initial conversations with people (pre-evangelism) to spark an interest in the story of his salvation. Once a heart is opened to learn more, a simple Bible study can lay a foundation of truth upon which faith is built.

Andy then shares how, in going through a simple Bible study series, people can learn from God's word about the source, content, and recipients of blessing. As Andy illustrates, this study material has been simplified over time as a previous version was found to be too complex. This is a reminder that we always need to reflect on the effectiveness of what we do and that we need the courage and wisdom to make necessary adaptions, changes, and corrections along the way. This is always best done in honest and humble consultation with the local people we serve.

The passages chosen in the suggested Bible study series contain many references to the theme of "blessing." By taking the time to develop what "blessing" means from both the Old and New Testaments, God's salvation history can be understood more clearly. Therefore, since blessing is a high value of Bikolano culture, using it as a theme to understand the gospel message is appropriate.

Many of us work in a culture where "blessing" is highly valued. For us, Andy's presentation of the good news through the theme of "blessing" can be very helpful. It may even challenge or enhance our own evangelistic methods, as it has already done to mine.

Presenting the gospel as a blessing in Taiwan

In Taiwan, where my wife and I have served for nearly ten years, blessing is one of the desired values among the people. One place that this can be seen very frequently is on the front doors of homes throughout Taiwan. During the Chinese New Year celebration, many people place the character for blessing, 福 (Mandarin: *Fu*, Taiwanese: *Hok*), on the front door. Frequently, the character is turned upside down, representing a wish for blessing to come to the household as the character for upside down is a homonym of the character for "to arrive".

Since reading Andy's article, I have started using the theme of "blessing" as a pre-evangelistic topic of conversation in central Taiwan. I often bring up the topic of blessing, saying that I see the character on many front doors. I then ask a simple question: "In Taiwanese culture, what kind of person is blessed?" There is no one single response, but I often get one of these three answers: "People who are healthy are blessed." "People who have money are blessed." "People who have a good family are blessed."

It is here that I share with people that Jesus tells us what kind of person is blessed. I then refer to the verse that Andy highlighted from Luke 11:28 where Jesus says that those who hear the word of God and keep it are blessed. From here, I ask if I can share with them the basic story of the Bible so that they can hear about God's salvation. It is this salvation that brings true blessing. After all, the Chinese word for "gospel" is "福音 (Mandarin: *Fu-yin*, Taiwanese: *Hok-im*)," which can literally be translated as "the blessed sound!" Understanding that blessing is part of the Chinese word for "gospel," it only makes sense that presenting the gospel as a blessing should be one of our evangelistic strategies in Taiwan.

I know that folk-religious Taiwanese don't regard Jesus as highly as the folk-Catholic Bikolanos that Andy has worked with in the Philippines. Yet, there is a high regard for famous teachers, among whom Jesus is included. As we share the blessing of the gospel with people in Taiwan, we also want them to learn about Jesus the great teacher who taught about God's blessing and became God's blessing for us. This is where sharing stories about Jesus' teaching and life can be a great help for people as they understand what true blessing is. As John Stott reminds us, "In a single word, God's good news is Jesus."[2] Likewise, Stott tells us that

> Our responsibility in evangelism is neither to create a Christ of our own who is not in Scripture, nor to embroider or manipulate the Christ who is in Scripture, but to bear faithful witness to the one and only Christ there is as God has presented him to the world in the remarkably unified testimony of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures.[3]



The inverted 福 (Mandarin: *Fu*, Taiwanese: *Hok*) character on the front of a door in author's apartment complex.

Concluding remarks

My first concluding remark is that many readers of *Mission Round Table* live and minister in cultures where "blessing" is not culturally valued to the extent that it is in the Bikolano or Taiwanese cultures.

Frank Tucker reminds us that we always need to take into consideration the social and cultural context of the person to whom we minister.[4] When we understand the cultural values of the people that we minister to, we can more effectively proclaim the truth of the gospel that speaks directly to them.

In his paper, Andy encourages readers to think about how they can more effectively share the good news of the gospel within their own ministry contexts. As an example of a different ministry context with a different theme for God's salvation, Andy leaves us with an example of a "Creation to Christ" story that can be shared in Japan. In this story, the theme of "blessing" is replaced with the theme of "restoration."

It is our duty (and joy) as ministers of the gospel to understand how we can utilize the values of the cultures in which we serve to present the good news in ways that are both cognitively and emotionally relevant to those who hear. We trust God for the salvation of the people we share with as we do everything we can to faithfully plant and water the gospel seeds that we and others have sown.

The second remark with which I wish to conclude concerns using the theme of blessing to proclaim the gospel when following Jesus also involves suffering.

Becoming a Christian and following Jesus is the most blessed life that any human can experience. Christians experience the blessings of having a restored relationship with the God who created them, the true hope of eternal salvation, the indwelling Holy Spirit who continues to transform them, and fellowship with other brothers and sisters in Christ, only to mention a few.

Yet being a Christian in a sinful, broken world that is at enmity with God can bring hardship. Disappointment, persecution, and suffering are common in the Christian life and may come as the result of a person's decision to follow Jesus. As *The Cape Town Commitment* states,

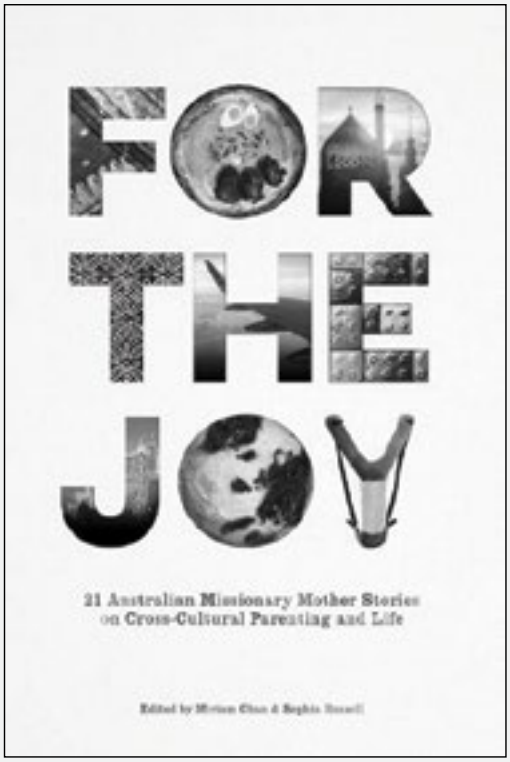
> Many Christians living in comfort and prosperity need to hear again the call of Christ to be willing to suffer for him. For many other believers live in the midst of such suffering as the cost of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in a hostile religious culture. They may have seen loved ones martyred, or endured torture or persecution because of their faithful obedience, yet continue to love those who have so harmed them.[5]

Many of the non-Christian Taiwanese men that I know would potentially face persecution from family members if they became Christians and stopped participating in the folk-religious practice of ancestor veneration. To stop this generational practice would be viewed as rejecting filial piety and neglecting family obligations.

Everyone who seeks to experience the blessings of the gospel needs to understand that these hardships are part of the blessed life as well. Jesus tells us, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23, ESV). Understanding the gospel message also means understanding this call to total discipleship. We must not forget to include this in our gospel proclamation as we share about God's blessing with others.

May God make us more useful for his kingdom as we share the good news of Jesus Christ in meaningful ways in our ministry contexts so that others can hear, understand, and experience God's blessing as they call out in faith to him.
MRT

[1] John Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World: Updated and Expanded* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 60.
[2] Stott, *Christian Mission*, 65.
[3] Stott, *Christian Mission*, 70.
[4] Frank Tucker, *Intercultural Communication for Christian Ministry* (Adelaide: Frank Tucker, 2013), 53.
[5] The Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment*, https://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment#p2-3-2 (accessed 4 July 2019).



For the Joy: 21 Australian Missionary Mother Stories on Cross-Cultural Parenting and Life

Miriam Chan and Sophia Russell, eds. Sydney: Grace Abounding, 2018.

Honestly written, raw in emotion, sad and joyful in equal measure, this collection of stories encompasses varied terrains: from the desert to the mountains, from far-flung places to jam-packed cities. The stories provide unique perspectives and insights into the complexities of parenting children while serving God on the mission field in a wide range of contexts: home-schooling while living in a bus, navigating the toddler years as a "third culture mum", giving birth in a foreign hospital, raising a child with special needs, recovering from anxiety on the field, and handling the grief of losing your family to persecution.

"Whenever I visit Bible colleges where missionaries train, women want to know what it is like to be a mother on the mission field.… This is a set of stories that needs to be told."
~ Evelyn Hibbert, *Leading Multicultural Teams*

How would They React?

Brian Powell



Brian Powell worked with the Manobo people in the Southern Philippines over a period of twenty-two years. He and his wife, Laureen, translated portions of the Old Testament into Manobo and were involved in other areas of ministry. Since 2015, they have been the OMF Orientation Course coordinators in Singapore.

A story inspired by Acts 4:29. Told from the point of view of an anonymous observer (possibly an angel?)

"How would they react?" That was the question that was often in my mind as I watched those early days of the church. How would the people react? How would the religious leaders react? How would the disciples react?

Take for example what happened when Peter and John spoke to a lame beggar in the name of Jesus Christ and the beggar was healed. How would the people react?

Well, the people were not so blinded by prejudice and pre-conceived ideas, so when they saw the lame man walking and praising God, they joined in and praised God too. It was an incredible miracle that had been done. There was no denying it: they'd all walked past the same man many times on their way to the temple and had seen how incapable he was and now here he was running around and telling everyone that God had healed him in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. That was definitely something worth praising God for, even if they didn't understand it.

The next question, though was "how will the religious leaders react?" That one was more complicated. They were very unhappy for anyone other than one of their own group to be teaching people in the temple (as Peter and John were now doing). They were especially keen to stamp out talk of Jesus of Nazareth whom they thought they had disposed of once and for all a few weeks earlier. However, they could not explain how a man who had been paralysed for forty years could be walking and jumping. Ironically, they wanted to tell the people to stop praising God for the healing, but then they also realised that their job was supposed to be leading people into praising God. So they were at a loss for what to do. They couldn't let it get any worse though, so they decided to put Peter and John in prison overnight and interrogate them in the morning.

They were most surprised though, thinking that they would easily be able to win a debate over a couple of country bumpkins who'd never been to school, only to find that they couldn't answer their arguments! So, when brains failed them, they turned to brawn. They started to threaten Peter and John. "We'll have you put out of the synagogue. We'll stop you from being able to come into the temple. We'll have your possessions confiscated. We'll have you flogged. We'll hand you over to Pilate."

So how would Peter and John react to that, I wondered? Would they cave in and opt for a quiet life?

No! Far from being contrite and agreeing to be quiet, these disciples said they would rather obey God than people.

Then, when they were released, Peter and John went back to their friends and told them about what had happened. How would the rest of the disciples react, I wondered? Well, they started to pray, praising God for who he was. Then they said to God, "Lord, you've heard what they've been saying. You've heard their threats," and I thought, "Right, now they're going to ask God to put a hedge of protection around them. Or perhaps they're going to ask God to strike down their enemies. Or maybe they're going to ask God to show them where to go and hide for a while." But no. What did they ask for? They asked for boldness to speak God's word. They weren't going to be stopped by a few taunts, a few threats, the possibility of death even. They wanted the world to know the truth.

So, now I'm wondering, how about you? How will you react? How will you respond when faced with the threat of loss because of your testimony? Will you pray for protection? Will you pray for an escape? Or will you pray for boldness to speak out in Jesus' name?

How will we respond? **MRT**

Building Bridges to Oral Cultures: Journeys among the Least-reached

By K. Carla Bowman with James Bowman. Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2017. ISBN 978-87808-495-1. 255pp.

Reviewed by Iljo de Keijzer



Carla and Jim Bowman began working in the 1980s among the indigenous people of South America. Their initial focus was on Scripture engagement. When they realized many people could not read well, their logical response was to teach literacy. At some point, they realized the more honorable thing to do would be to facilitate Scripture engagement according to the oral culture of the people. This book is an account of their journey to orality and all the challenges they faced along the road.

This book is an easy read, written as a story in short chapters. Each chapter starts with an excerpt from the Bowmans' diary, followed by stories of their struggles and discoveries on their journey, and ends with some specific lessons learned. The authors are honest about their mistakes and also show how their local effort led to a worldwide network.

There is an estimated population of four billion people in the world who prefer to learn orally. This includes those who cannot read or barely read, and also educated people who can read well but prefer oral ways of learning. This book teaches the importance of encouraging local leaders and equipping them to continue the good work and bring it further than any foreigner ever could. And though the book is set in South America, it highlights the danger that the syncretism observed there can also be found in Asia or anywhere Christianity exists where there is little discipleship and few are willing or able to learn from written Scripture.

The Bowmans' cultural observations pinpoint the need to be wise when using video presentations that may be oral but are Western. For instance, when the Jesus film was shown in South America, some people asked questions like, "How did they get the cameras up there exactly as *Jesus* was dying?" This was a clue that the movie might not convey what those showing it thought was being conveyed. The authors further wondered, "Do the listeners understand that an echo in the voice means that God is speaking?" They also felt that the invitation at the end of the movie to accept Jesus as a personal choice might not be helpful in a culture where standing out from the crowd is to be avoided. While people came to believe in Christ through this video, potential dangers were noted and a search began for more culturally appropriate ways to communicate the gospel.

In chapters 8–15 the authors describe their journey in Mexico. Stories tell of excited people learning stories by heart, the gospel spreading quickly through these stories, and of the people's self-esteem being raised through discovering their gifts. These showed the authors that people have an amazing capacity for memorizing Scripture and exhibit great creativity in passing it on.

There is an appropriate emphasis on training people how to dialogue after telling stories and how to select stories. I believe this is essential for the oral movement to develop further. Also, it is important to learn how to address worldview through stories: witch doctors, sickness, barrenness, etc. The authors also show the importance of helping people decide if they have earned the right to tell stories, which story is the right one to tell in each situation, and what specific stories pave the way for the gospel. Had this last element been worked out more deeply the book would have been even more useful.

In Chapters 16–20, the Bowmans' ministry unfolds as the oral movement spread into other parts of the world, including Africa, South Asia, and Central Asia. In all these areas, the responses and way of working are very similar. Cultural issues are different, but the way of resolving them is similar. Local participants were encouraged to value their own culture, discover new gifts, and continue training others.

In Pakistan, by engaging a highly educated group, they discovered that orality can also be used at this level. They were even invited to teach parables about forgiveness at a Muslim university. *They thus engaged the power of stories, without the stigma of the black book called Bible.*

I was encouraged to read of the specific care given to selecting oral stories for certain people as these stories open doors that the Bible and preaching cannot. The authors explain how specific stories can open discussions about the way, discipleship, and leadership training.

In the last part of the book—chapters 21–26—the discussion between the roles of those from the West vs. the East are explored. Many places in the majority world cannot be reached by Western missionaries. But missionaries often make good trainers and coaches. What better role is there for Western missionaries than to train and equip local believers? Even if they are frustrated at not being able to become good storytellers in one week, Western missionaries can spark a movement that will reach way beyond where they could ever go.

This book is very practical and easy to read. While the authors give a good overview of the different processes in using stories, I would have appreciated more instruction on how to choose stories for particular settings and times. At times, the authors tend to look down a little on other Western missionaries. I also found that the organization of the chapters can be a bit confusing with titles not quite covering the content. Even so, the book is generally well written and really helpful for the Asian church to reflect on evangelism and discipleship within its own culture. This book can help us evaluate whether our practices are biblical and whether they are Asian or Western. The book helpfully touches on elements of syncretism, the need for good discipleship, and the importance of addressing world view. And while it does not give the answers on how to build bridges to oral cultures in specific Asian countries, it raises questions that we need to ask ourselves in order to find the right answers for each of the cultures in which we serve or are from. This is not an easy process, but it needs to be done if we want to move towards true Asian biblical discipleship.