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Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews reflecting
global evangelical theology for the purpose
of discerning the obedience of faith*



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Editorial: Theology and the World

IN OCTOBER 2010, four thousand people met in Cape Town, South Africa under the auspices of The Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Alliance for the Third International Congress on World Evangelization. We were well represented at this important event and carried some reflections on it in our other publication, *Theological News*, at the time. We introduce this issue with a longer personal reflection by Rosalee Ewell (Brazil) and John Baxter-Brown (UK/Switzerland) which is certain to create interest in our readers. It should be read in association with the material in earlier issues which presented papers and findings from a series of consultations conducted by the Lausanne Theology Working Group and the WEA Theological Commission in preparation for the Congress. (For full details of the Congress, visit <http://www.lausanne.org/>)

This paper heads up several others on our theme for this issue. James Danaher (USA) discusses the nature of theology itself in relation to our personal knowledge of Jesus Christ, advising us that 'Only the experience of God's presence in prayer brings us to find our security in the mystery of God's mercy rather than our own understanding'.

From here we move to different contexts. First, Andrew G. Wildsmith (Kenya) discusses how western systematic theology has been introduced into the African context and proposes a new approach based on relationships rather than abstract topics that would help with pastoral issues. Wonsuk Ma (Korea/UK) analyses the outstanding ministry of David Yonggi Cho and his

famous 'Theology of Blessing', showing how it fits in with its distinctively Korean and Pentecostal context. His article covers not only the rise of this theology in the period of rapid growth of Korean Christianity but also reflects on the challenges it faces in a new era for that church in that country.

The next article takes us to another context completely, that of human disability. In a carefully argued essay, Amos Yong (USA) examines traditional approaches to theodicy, epistemology, and questions of death/afterlife from a disability perspective. One of the results of this process is a 'performative philosophy of religion', an activity that shapes human dispositions, activities, and political life. Including both physical and intellectual disability as well as personal and social aspects, Yong argues, 'If life in the hereafter manifests the divine and cosmic justice we all hope for, and also includes people with disabilities in a sense just as they are, then such notions of justice and inclusion should also guide our present efforts.'

We round off this issue on theology and the world with a Bible study article by Susan Campbell (Australia) on the Apostle Paul's classic address in Athens which is a guide to 'shaping mission for today'. This passage 'encourages Christians to trust the work of the Spirit in un-believing cultures, to put aside our arrogant claims to possess all the answers, and to enjoy the journey as we discover new insight from other cultures'.

Thomas Schirmacher, General Editor
David Parker, Executive Editor

Changing the World, One Story at a Time: Rediscovering Evangelism after Cape Town 2010

C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell and John Baxter-Brown

KEYWORDS: *Lausanne Movement; evangelism; unity; self-emptying, transformation, marginalized, community, character, Philippians*

THE FIRST BIBLICAL reflection at the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization began with a call to creativity. In his exposition of Ephesians 1, plenary speaker Ajith Fernando argued that all Christians must use their creative energies to make Christ known to a lost and broken world so that this world might know, through the witness of Christians, God's plan for the fullness of time. The week-long Congress that followed was in some aspects challenging and creative, but not in terms of developing a richer theological understanding of evangelism.

This essay seeks to examine Cape Town 2010's perspective on evangelism through the lens of another Pauline text—the great hymn of Philippians 2:6-11.¹ The theological content of this passage and its implications for ethics, spirituality, and Christian witness offer an alternative view to the highly scripted programme of Lausanne III and its captivity to a very western 'top-down' understanding of the evangelistic task.

By placing our understanding of evangelization within the holistic framework that arises out of Paul's teaching (echoing also the teaching

¹ Quotations are from NRSV unless otherwise noted.

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and example of Jesus himself), we offer our reflections of Lausanne III as constructive criticisms, praying that future developments within the Lausanne Movement will embrace a larger, richer and more poignant vision of the term *world evangelisation*. Such criticisms are made with the belief that one of Lausanne's greatest gifts to the church is the constant reminder that all Christians are called to evangelize—that there is a world in desperate need of the good news of Christ and that, despite all our frailties and limitations, God has chosen to work through the church so that the world might know God's plan for all of creation. If the Lausanne Movement loses this calling—if the voice that reminds evangelical churches around the world that evangelism is the queen of Christian ministries—then Lausanne will have been silenced and its existence as a movement will be still.

I Evangelism as a Shared Task

The letter of Philippians is set against the backdrop of Paul's imprisonment. He reminds the Philippians that they shared in the gospel 'from the first day until now' (1:5) and shared in 'God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel' (1:7). Paul tells them that his imprisonment 'has actually helped to spread the gospel' (1:12). His situation has enhanced the message and people know why he is a prisoner (1:13). The brothers and sisters have drawn strength from his imprisonment and therefore have a greater confidence in speaking the

word (1:14). Christ is being proclaimed, albeit from a variety of motivations (1:14-18) and Paul encourages the believers to live their lives 'in a manner worthy of the gospel' (1:27), striving 'side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel', even as he asks them to pray for him, that he may speak 'with all boldness' (1:20). The first chapter, then, contains a strong theme about the queen of all Christian ministries—evangelism.

For Paul, this sharing of the gospel is not limited to proclamation, although this is crucial, as there are two additional elements that arise from within the text. First, Paul emphasises the communal nature of evangelism, and second, Paul reminds the Philippians that character and witness go hand in hand. The first emphasis points to the fact that believers share in the work of the gospel through their prayers, unity, steadfastness, suffering, work, giving and so forth. To put this slightly differently,

The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world... The church does not really need an evangelistic strategy. The church is the evangelistic strategy.²

Secondly, for this to be the case, there is for Paul an explicit require-

² Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007), 15.

ment that the believers live their lives 'in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (1:27). This entails cessation of arguing, and instead, becoming blameless and innocent 'in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world' (2:14-15). Their gentleness is to be 'known to everyone' (4:5). These two additional factors—sharing and shining—are *essential* dimensions of evangelization. In other words, Paul calls for character, activity, and preaching, the three vital elements of mission today, tomorrow and through all ages.

For Paul, fidelity to the gospel cannot be reduced merely to preaching, for the gospel is much more than a set of truths phrased as Enlightenment propositions. Rather, the gospel is a way of being and becoming, a contextualisation of the life of Jesus in a local community, a story that requisitions all other claims to authority and loyalty, a narrative that changes the course of all human history, directing the past to the future via the Cross. Chapter 2 of Philippians is to be understood against this background.

II Evangelism and Kenosis

Paul uses the highly eloquent hymn or poem as the main theological framework for the whole epistle. It is a delightfully and skilfully crafted piece of writing and stands in contrast to the more informal remainder of the letter. The hymn is a celebration of the incarnation, crucifixion and ascension of Christ, of Jesus emptying himself and becoming human. René Padilla, a significant and influential leader within the Lausanne movement, once noted that in the Incarnation, 'God contextu-

alized himself'.³ It is because of this emptying, and subsequent obedience, that God exalts him. This movement within the passage is deeply significant and worthy of examining in more depth. There is a mystery hidden in the move from Christ's pre-existence, through his taking the form of a slave, passing through 'death—even death on a cross' and then being highly exalted.

There are three scenes in this passage. The first is where Christ is pre-existent 'in the form of God' but chooses not to exploit his 'equality with God'. Instead he humbles himself, taking the path of suffering and servanthood. In both of these scenes Jesus is the actor. In the third scene, however, God is the actor and Christ is the one being acted upon, being highly exalted, receiving the name that is above every other name. There are two aspects of this that we shall explore. First, the pivotal theological factor is the voluntary nature of Christ's emptying and obedience, and second, there is movement within the passage that is reflected elsewhere in the New Testament. This movement is both literal in the sense that Jesus descends, becomes incarnate and subsequently—after the cross and resurrection—ascends. There is also symbolic movement in the text, as we shall explore below.

Within this hymn lies an echo of the story of Genesis 2 and 3, and a contrast is drawn between the first humans and Jesus. God commanded Adam in Genesis 2:16-17 that he could eat from any

3 C. René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 83.

tree in the garden with the exception of one, 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. The temptation the serpent places before the woman is to eat the fruit of this tree, 'for God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened and you will be *like God*, [emphasis added] knowing good and evil' (3:5). The woman saw that the fruit was 'good for food... a delight to the eyes... and was desirable to make one wise' (v. 6 NASB). She ate, and then the man also ate and 'the eyes of both of them were opened' (v. 7).

In this creation narrative we see that first couple acting in a contrary manner to what the story will later tell us of Jesus. Adam and Eve voluntarily chose to grasp—the desire to be like God was not satisfied with being created in the image and likeness of God. They wanted more. Yet in filling themselves up with the fruit and the knowledge of good and evil, there also came a reduction in stature: no longer would mastery over creation happen easily; henceforth it would involve struggle and sweat and work. Adam and Eve's elevation—being created from the dust of the earth—was revoked: now they would return to the earth as dust. And even that earth was now cursed because of their choice.

As a stark contrast, Paul sets up Christ, who already shared in equality with God—that same equality that Adam so desperately wanted—but voluntarily 'emptied himself', taking the form of a slave, and was 'made in the likeness of human beings'. Christ's descent was of his own free submission to the will of God, humbling himself and becoming obedient 'to the point of death'. Consequently, and as a direct result of his obedience, God highly

exalted him.

Elsewhere Paul uses much more explicit language about the first and last Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12-21). However, in Philippians he is deliberately and consciously making this connection in the context of Christian behaviour. The Philippians—and therefore we—ought to have this same mind as Jesus had. We are to model our behaviour on that exemplified by Christ. This point is explicit within the text and it has direct application in evangelization.

Frequently evangelization is perceived as an act of obedience in response to Jesus' words to his disciples in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-19). However, according to Paul (and Jesus himself, as is found elsewhere in the gospels), there is much more to the task of evangelism than obedience. Evangelization has to do with one's entire life, with the life of the church and the ways in which such a community lives so as to show the culture around them who is the one true God.

This was another important point made in Fernando's opening Bible study on Ephesians at Cape Town 2010. He said,

[W]hat if those who are lonely find that Christians are the only ones they can count on as friends? Or what if those who are tired of corruption find that Christians are the only ones who don't resort to corrupt practices?... Evangelism is about our life and our proclamation.⁴

⁴ Ajith Fernando, Bible Exposition 1, Lausanne III, Cape Town, South Africa, 18 October 2010.

In Philippians 2:5 Paul talks about the inward attitude among Christians. The language is full of motivation-connected words: *encouragement; consolation of love; fellowship of the Spirit; affection and compassion; same mind; same love; united in spirit; humility of mind*. Paul is interpreting obedience in the context of motivation: the Philippians are to contextualise Jesus in their lives, unity and witness.

Three concepts are linked in a holistic framework here: first, the Philippians' witness is derived both from their experience of Jesus through the Spirit and from their life in community, which provides them with further motivation; then, Paul argues that this experience should lead to obedience which was perfectly modelled in Christ; and finally, there should therefore be a change in behaviour and attitude leading to authentic witness before the wider—and in the Philippians' case, pagan—community. In the words of a friend, *our witness stems from our first hand discovery of Jesus and not a second hand Story*.

Accepting this motivational praxis of Christian witness allows us to question the places and ways in which Jesus was contextualised at Lausanne III. The personal stories and testimonies shared on the main platform and in some of the multiplexes gave the Congress participants a flavour of God at work around the world and the many-coloured ways in which the Spirit leads God's people to serve and witness for Jesus. Some of these stories led to the sharing of other wonders around the table-groups, in prayer, and in informal conversations. Yet, at the same time, the Congress programme did not allow enough space or time for participants

to work through the challenges that come when Christians strive to 'be of the same mind of Christ', as Paul correctly demands of the church in Philippi.

In other words, while Cape Town 2010 brought together an amazingly diverse group of Christians from all around the globe, its programme did not take full advantage of such diversity to allow time for deep discussion on what unity might look like, how humility and evangelism are practised in different contexts, or what lessons the church in Latin American can learn from the church in Asia. If, according to Philippians (and John 17 and many other texts), unity and evangelism go hand-in-hand, then Lausanne III fell short of making such a call loud and clear to the broad evangelical church and to all God's people.

The movement highlighted within this hymn in Philippians is reflected in various NT passages. It can be a vertical movement: the grain of wheat which must fall into the ground and die before it can bear fruit (Jn. 12:24); in Ephesians (4:8-11), Paul refers to Jesus descending and then ascending 'far above all the heavens', bringing captives in his train; in Mary's Magnificat, the mighty will be made low, the lowly lifted up (Lk. 2:52).

The movement can be horizontal, as when the first will be sent to the back of the queue and the last brought to the front (Matt. 19:30 and 20:16). The movement can apply metaphorically, for example, as Paul identifies with the death and resurrection of Christ personally in Galatians 2:20 (NASB): 'I have been crucified with Christ, yet I live, but not me but Christ lives in me.' In Corinthians Paul writes about wis-

dom and power, yet God 'chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong' (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

There are numerous other references which convey a similar sense of literal or metaphorical movement. In all such references there is a close association of movement with the ethical framework of God's reign. Indeed, we can extend this topsy-turvy dimension of the reign of God, and read more about it in Jesus' parables. We can also look at his life from the birth narratives onwards and see it modelled. Always there is this characteristic of the bottom up nature of God's kingdom.

This topsy-turvy motion is God's way of changing the balance of power from below upwards. Such movement suggests, in biblical terms, that those who seek to 'climb the ladder' as the world envisions such climbing will in the end fall. The lies and illusions of power of those at the top have been revealed by the death of one Jewish carpenter. It is not simply that God has a bias towards the poor, the marginalised, the vulnerable, or the weak. Rather, it is that God has chosen to reveal his power through those the world sees as poor and powerless.

The hymn is therefore one example of the 'upside down' reign of God, where issues of power and status are turned on their head, where self-sacrifice is invited and where we discover that the ethics of God's kingdom are at odds with all other systems. This has implications for evangelisation, as we have seen.

III Hearing Voices from the Margins

This 'bottom up' principle that displays itself so clearly in the biblical texts also points us towards the local, the small, untold narratives of how God is changing the world, one story at a time. At Cape Town 2010 there were various opportunities to hear some of these stories, such as testimonies of Palestinians and Jews coming together under the lordship of Jesus, and of forgiveness and continued service towards 'enemies' in Afghanistan or Uganda. However, even though participants were blessed by such stories, there appeared to be no mechanisms within the Congress programme to ensure that the conversations and wisdom arising from the table groups, for example, were fed 'up' to the organisers.

On centre stage and in the main plenaries the voices speaking were still primarily those of white, north-Atlantic men, such that it was not clear how the voices of women, of young people, or of the Majority World in general had helped shape the Congress programme. Though held in South Africa, Lausanne III was a very western meeting, scripted down to the minute, with a sense that the world has already been analysed and mapped and that this Congress was going to lead the way to fixing all the world's problem spots. Pain and suffering made themselves known in the testimonies and some dialogue sessions, but in the official programme there was no time for collective silence or even repentance for the ways in which evangelicals have too often grasped for power or failed to stand against those who do.

Ironically, examining these aspects of the Congress in light of Philippians, one must pause to recall that the church in Philippi was anything but a centre-stage type of congregation. In that proud city—a city that grasped for power, a miniature Rome—the first three fruits of Paul’s evangelistic endeavour were a rich Asian woman, a young Greek girl who had been possessed by demons, was marginalized and exploited by society, and finally a bureaucrat for the Empire. These were the founding members of Europe’s first church!⁵ And this was the congregation that gathered alongside a riverbank and is called to humility, service, and moral purity (Phil. 2:15-16).

Paul’s use of the theme of suffering and pain harkens back to the description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 and to an image of the faithful witness who is very far from the power-hungry, status-driven tele-evangelists. The Suffering Servant ‘poured out himself to death’ (Is. 53:12), voluntarily accepting that ‘it was the will of the Lord to crush him’ (53:10). This attitude of self-giving, which Paul encourages the Philippians to imitate, is perfectly modelled in Christ.

Throughout the Gospel narratives themselves Jesus time and again refuses to allow power or prestige to shape his ministry or his dealings with people. Rather, what we find in Jesus is the willingness to identify with the sinner in his baptism, with the prostitutes among his friends, with a tax collector as a follower, with the weak and mar-

ginalized as the faithful. At Lausanne III, Chris Wright developed this theme in relation to the temptations that current church leaders face.

Wright pointed out that there are three idols that can have particular appeal to God’s people: power, success and greed. The results of these idolatries are fatal. ‘Lack of faith, lack of love and lack of honesty contribute to the failure of our evangelism efforts.’ He urged the church leaders to come back to being HIS people—people of Humility, Integrity and Simplicity.⁶ These tie in well with the themes of unity and witness as Paul displays them in Philippians.

The third temptation Jesus faced was in effect a short cut to fulfilling his task. Satan showed him ‘all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour’, saying he would give them to Jesus ‘if you will fall down and worship me’ (Matt. 4:8-9). In Matthew then, we have the ministry of Jesus beginning after an encounter with the devil which was set on a high mountain involving all the kingdoms of the earth, and ideas of worship and service. The tempter suggests to Jesus a shorter, quicker way to achieve world domination. Satan was offering all that to Christ, provided he took a different path from the one ordained by God for him, the path of suffering. It is a temptation about power and priorities.

At the end of the same Gospel there is the famous passage, mistakenly called The Great Commission (‘Great Reminder’ would be a better term),

⁵ Pedro Arana, ‘Commentary on Philippians’, in the *Latin American Bible Commentary*, (San Jose, Costa Rica: CLLB), forthcoming.

⁶ <http://www.lausanne.org/articles/return-to-humility-integrity-and-simplicity.html>

which again is set on a mountain and involves worship, power, authority and all the nations of the earth. But now it is Jesus who has the power and authority, given to him by God. It is on the basis of this power that Jesus re-commissions his disciples, reminding them of the task of world evangelisation he has already commissioned them to do and for which he has prepared and equipped them. But the crucial dimension usually overlooked here is that this closure to Jesus' earthly ministry mirrors the opening of that ministry and concerns the acquisition and use of power.

The temptation is to use power as a short cut to avoid the path of suffering and pain. It is also the temptation to be deaf to the voices from the margins and to focus instead on what is happening in the world's seats of power. Jesus opposes all of this: the path to true authority and power is the path of suffering, of self-emptying, of giving oneself away. It is also the path not only of hearing the voices from the margins, but of being present with and for them.

IV Evangelism and Discipleship

Jesus was present with those on the margins. He was brought up in a small and troubled land on the edge of the Roman Empire, surrounded by and befriending the poor, the sick, the weak, the outcasts, peasants and labourers. It was from such as these that he called his disciples. This beautiful example of Christ is held up by Paul—especially but by no means exclusively—in the Philippians hymn. The apostle shows how Jesus exempli-

fies a model of behaviour for Christ's followers to adopt. It is the character of Christian witness—the character of humility and simplicity, and the ability to be present at the margins, listening and telling the small stories that change the world, one at a time. Yet, how concretely is this done?

One theme that arose frequently at Cape Town 2010 was the need for discipleship. That is, various speakers emphasized the fact that evangelicals have been fairly good at spreading the gospel, but are weak in exemplifying and teaching how that good news takes shape and transforms lives and communities. One example given was the genocide in Rwanda. How can a country where over 90% of the population claim to be Christian kill itself in such horrible ways? The lack of depth in Christian formation was one key point mentioned by the speaker and discipleship was named as a necessary ingredient for there to be true reconciliation. Yet despite the call for discipleship at Lausanne III, the very shape of the programme mitigated against dialogue and discernment about what evangelism and discipleship might look like in the 21st century.

In the gospel narratives Jesus' presence with those who are marginalized, with the outcasts, but also before religious leaders and governors, offers the church a model for evangelism, discipleship and the use of power. These are the same elements Paul displays so well in his letter to the Philippians. He congratulates his fellow sisters and brothers for their faithful witness, a witness that is so powerful because it is small, unknown to the Empire, and challenging to the powers precisely in its insignificance. These are the small

stories that change the world for Christ.

A key issue facing the church in the world today is how power is given away or grasped. Since the time of Constantine the church has had a troubled relationship with power and this inheritance remains with us almost 1700 years later. Churches tend towards hierarchical structures, flirting with models of leadership that have, on occasion, brought great dishonour to the name of Jesus. The rich, the powerful, the influential still tend towards setting the agenda and often the voices of those way down the ladder, at the grass roots levels, are not heard.

In contrast, there is a view, well summarized by Lesslie Newbigin, that 'the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation... the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it'.⁷ This is essentially an incarnational view, reflecting Paul's kenotic theology but applied ecclesialogically. It emphasises the need for Jesus to be contextualised in the local congregation, the kiln in which disciples are tempered and the seat of authentic witness.

The authority of the churches' witness to and for Jesus in the world is essentially bottom up, not imposed from the top downwards. In order for the church to be the church for the world and in service of God, it must be a place where people are shaped into conformity to Christ. This type of train-

ing cannot be limited to Sunday worship alone, but speaks to the task of making disciples.

Discipleship, according to the biblical texts, is not the result of grand schemes of training Christian leaders or of high-profile congresses. Rather, it is twelve people gathered around a meal with a teacher; it is Bible study and reflection in small groups; it is friendship between two persons who would otherwise have nothing in common; it is the voice of one prisoner, writing to his distant flock about how joyful he is because of their faithful witness.

Out of such relationships, the authority and power of the gospel are displayed in new and surprising ways and the church that embodies and encourages this discipleship is enabled to carry on her evangelistic ministry, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Discipleship is therefore primarily relational and didactic and only secondarily (or perhaps thirdly or fourthly or fifthly) programmatic and proscribed.

V Evangelism, Unity and Transformation

The church that makes disciples is also a unified church, for witness and unity go together. Jesus makes this point explicit in his prayer in John 17:20-23 (NASB):

that they may all be one... so that the world may believe that You sent Me... that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.

It is also a theme that arises time and again in Paul's letters. In the text

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 227.

of Philippians the apostle uses the language of 'being of the same mind', that is, the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:2-5). Similar to Jesus' prayer in John 17, Paul here draws a connection between love, sharing in the Spirit, and unity. The Christians in Philippi are called to love one another, to be humble, to regard the interests of others as more important, to become like Christ. In other words, the believers are called to a life of discipleship in order to shine as lights in a dark world.

Christians are God's witnesses to this corrupt and lost generation. Therefore, they must be united, not quarrelling or vying for authority (as was the situation in Corinth), but becoming slaves, in service of God and for a suffering world. It is not surprising that John Mott, evangelist and ecumenical pioneer during the first half of the 20th century, called for *the evangelization of the world in this generation*, thus echoing Paul's emphasis on the importance of church unity in the evangelistic task, and, conversely, the importance of evangelism in the ecumenical movement.

The unity of the church was one theme that warranted much greater reflection at Lausanne III, particularly in light of the programmatic focus on 'The Whole Church'. If evangelism is a core ministry of the church, then that same church must look closely at the ways in which its divisions work against the very ministry it seeks to carry out. Historically, the Lausanne Movement has been such a place—a forum where evangelicals of various stripes and colours have come together for the sake of God's kingdom. Such unity is not easily or simply achieved, as Paul's correspondence with Corinth

makes clear.

Whilst it is important to note that Lausanne itself is not the church, it is a place where such divisions can (and should) be overcome, a space open for reconciliation. The challenges facing the church in terms of Christian unity are the very battles to which Paul calls Christians to fight—it is worth the fight because without unity, the witness of the church is rendered void. Without being united, 'minding' Christ, as Paul says, Christians fail in their task of being shining stars in the world. And if Christians fail in this task, then there will be no transformation of society.

There is a great need and urgency in our churches today to recover this link between evangelism, discipleship, unity and the transformation of society. Taken together, they shape a holistic and credible witness of the church and without one or the other, this witness is weakened and our well thought out words of proclamation run the risk of becoming mere noise. As Ajith Fernando said in his opening remarks in Cape Town, Christians must use all their creative powers in the great task of world evangelization. But in order to do this rightly, there must be one mind—the mind of Christ—and the creativity to listen to the voices from below, the voices of those present with God's world in all its suffering and pain.

The transformation of society takes place at the local level—it is the small congregation embracing a teenage mother and raising both the baby and its child-mother as their own. It is the work of one black minister and his white friend who stand together to oppose apartheid in South Africa, or

the young woman who struggles against the caste system in India. Tales of suffering, of reconciliation, of martyrdom, and stories of some believers who face persecution in their efforts to follow Christ and who, like Jesus, pay the highest price for their obedience—these and other such narratives told at Lausanne III powerfully exemplified the work being done in God's upside-down kingdom.

In these stories the kenotic principle of Philippians came to life. The Lausanne Movement needs to discern what God might be saying to the wider church through such stories and how these testimonies can be told, over and over again, in different contexts, so that the evangelistic task of the church is strengthened and encouraged, just as Paul encouraged the Philippians.

It is vital for us—as evangelical and conciliar Christians—to find ways of working together in the task of world evangelization for the glory of God and the sake of a desperately needy and broken world. Our calling to have the same mind, the same love, united in spirit, and intent on one purpose, reminds us of the beauty of the diversity of God's kingdom which was partially but nonetheless beautifully dis-

played at Lausanne III. Yet do we have that unity which Paul talks about? How could this unity have been better displayed and discussed in Cape Town?

If Lausanne is truly going to be a movement for world evangelization, it must actively engage in the wider community of Christ's followers—the whole church—participating in the call to unity through a process of reconciliation. If Lausanne is truly going to be a movement for world evangelization, it must hear the voices from the margins and make itself a space where such voices can speak without threat and without danger.

Such voices must know not only that they are vital parts of the body of Christ, but that without them, the evangelical church falls prey to the temptation of grasping for power. If the church falls, it fails in discerning, as the Philippians did, the best ways to make Christ known in the particularity of each location and each culture. In the insignificance of the 'little people', in the local congregations and the hands-on practitioners, Lausanne will find its greatest authorities and strategizers of world evangelization.

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Theology in the 21st Century

James P. Danaher

KEYWORDS: *Reality, interpretation, understanding, perspective, revelation, culture, history, gospels, faith, authority, hermeneutic circle*

I Reality and Interpretation

Today we have come to a point in our history where we realize that what we have traditionally dubbed *reality* is an interpretation of the data of our experience. Furthermore, we now know that the understanding through which we create our interpretation is not God-given, but comes to us at our mother's knee and is largely the product of human judgments passed onto us through our history, culture, and language communities. Thus, if we are serious about following Jesus, we must rethink much of our inherited understanding in the light of what Jesus said and did. In order to get a more transparent interpretation of the gospel, we need to be suspicious of the prejudices that make up our understanding, and allow the things that Jesus said and did to change that understanding.

Jesus' disciples constantly had to rethink the understanding through which they were interpreting Jesus' radical teachings. Their misinterpretation was always a result of the fact that their understanding was inadequate to interpret what Jesus was saying and doing. The same is true concerning the history of Jesus' followers down to our present day. Over the last two thousand years, people who were serious about following Jesus have allowed his teachings and life to change their understanding. The purpose of all such changes to our understanding was to bring us to a more transparent interpretation of the gospel, but the religious establishment meets all such changes with opposition. The opposition is always rooted in the same erroneous belief that the understanding or perspective of the religious establishment is sacred.

In fact, however, it is God that is sacred, and not our understanding or perspective. Sadly, we all too easily make an idol of our understanding and our theology becomes the thing in which we place our faith and trust. We

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believe that it rather than God will save us, and faith becomes simply a matter of having what we consider the right understanding.

In the past, such idolatrous faith in our own understanding had murderous effects. People killed one another in the name of Jesus because they thought they were defending the gospel rather than a historically and culturally relative perspective of the gospel. Fortunately, we now know that our understanding of everything, including the gospel, is perspectival and what we most often defend is our ego's attachment to that perspective rather than the gospel itself. Our egos and their attachment to what we claim to know are what so often fuel our religious fervour, and is what so often keeps us from the fullness of life to which God calls us as well.

The fullness of life God has for us in Christ Jesus requires that we renew our minds¹ and take on the mind of Christ.² In other words, we need to take on the Jesus perspective. Only as our understanding comes closer to replicating Jesus' understanding do we begin to get a more transparent interpretation of Jesus and the gospel. Unfortunately, there is a great obstacle: we tend to believe that our theological understanding represents who God is, and we therefore treat that understanding as if it were some absolute truth rather than simply our understanding or perspective.

In other areas, apart from theology, we are better at adapting new perspec-

tives. Most of us do not have much trouble understanding that Albert Einstein offers a better perspective of the physical universe than did Isaac Newton. Likewise, we find it easy to understand that a psychologist at the beginning of the 21st century does not have the same perspective on the human psyche that Freud had at the beginning of the 20th century. We accept the idea that historically our perspective and understanding of the world and our place in it changes. With new discoveries and insights, our understanding changes and opens new vistas not available in the past. Philosophy and science are generally open to such new perspectives, although usually not without some resistance.

Theology, on the other hand, confronts such new perspectives with more than a little resistance. Many people who can accept Einstein's perspective in physics or a 21st century perspective concerning the human psyche insist upon retaining an unaltered 16th century theology in spite of the better understanding that last five hundred years has produced. Their defence is that God has not changed, but the physical universe and human psyche have not changed either. What has changed is our understanding of them. The change is the result of discoveries and insights that give us a better perspective.

Luther and Calvin, as well as those of the Counter-Reformation, believed that the sun went around the earth rather than the earth going around the sun. They thought that was what they saw. We now know, however, that it was the result of their biased perspective, which imagined that the sun was moving and not the earth. We have a

1 Rom. 12:2.

2 Phil. 2:5.

better perspective today. Why then should we not equally be open to a better perspective of the gospel than what was available previously?

We no longer believe that the sun goes around the earth because that is what we see, nor do we believe that when we read a text our interpretation is a result of what we see in that text. The theologians of the Reformation did believe such things. They believed that their interpretation of the gospel was no interpretation at all but the result of what they saw in the text. Today we know that what we think we see is not simply the result of what is there but largely determined by what we bring to the experience. The world that we experience is phenomenal or hermeneutic; that is, a composite of both the raw data of experience and what we bring to that data. What we bring in terms of the understanding that forms our interpretation of the data are concepts that are the product of human judgments passed onto us by our history, culture, and language communities.

Thus, we all possess a very *human* perspective, and none of us has a God's-eye-view. We may have some God-given concepts but most of what makes up the understanding through which we interpret the world is of a human origin. Thus, we are interpretative beings, and our interpretive nature is what separates us from the rest of nature. Without history, culture, or language other creatures may interpret the data of their experience largely through a God-given understanding, but human beings certainly do not. With what we now know concerning the nature of the understanding through which we interpret our

experience, we should be more suspicious of that understanding and the way that it prejudices all of our experiences.

In the past, when we imagined that the mind was a *tabula rasa* and that we simply recorded data as given, hermeneutics or the study of interpretation had little place in our lives. It was the province of scholars seeking to interpret obscure texts. Unlike past generations who naively supposed that the way we conceptualized the world was the way the world was, we now understand the hermeneutic nature of our human condition. Today, we know that our human experience is a text that we must read and interpret.

Many see this perspectival and interpretive nature of our human condition as a threat to their faith and wish for an earlier time. The reason this is so threatening to so many is that they conceive of faith as a matter of believing certain propositions they held to be true. Historically, the reformers' idea of faith eventually came to mean that one believed doctrines different from those of Catholics, just as Catholic faith came to mean believing in doctrines and creeds different from what Protestants believed. Of course, the propositions that form our theological doctrines and creeds depend upon words, which we now know are not God-given. Human language has its content determined by forces at work within history, culture, and language communities. Hence, the words that constituted the propositional doctrines in which our modern ancestors put their faith reflected more our historical, cultural, and linguistic perspective rather than divine truths.

Thus, faith became a matter of

believing in one's own understanding, which was naively taken for truths concerning God. Consequently, Protestants killed Catholics and Catholics killed Protestants all in the name of God, because they imagined that their understanding represented objective truths about God. In the past, it was much easier for human beings to imagine that their understanding somehow reflected objective, sacred truths. Thankfully, we now know that the understanding through which we interpret God's communion with us is human rather than divine.

II The Nature of Faith

Faith is certainly essential to most religious traditions, and we read that, 'without faith, it is impossible to please God'.³ For many people, however, a Christian faith means that they believe that Jesus was the Son of God, born of a virgin, rose from the dead, and is the second person of the trinity. Of course, biblical faith, and especially the faith that Jesus speaks of in the Gospels is very different from that. On the two occasions where Jesus praises people for having great faith, neither involves individuals who believed the right sacred facts, held the appropriate doctrines, or were members of the right religious group.

Rather, they were people who had discovered some deep truth concerning the nature of God through the circumstances of their lives. The Roman centurion knew something about divine authority. As a Roman commander, he

was in a position of authority in Palestine, and a Jew like Jesus was under his authority, but this Roman centurion had come to know what real authority was. He knew that he had authority only because he was under the authority of Rome and he recognized that Jesus was under an even greater authority than that of Rome.⁴

Regarding the Syrophenician woman who, Jesus tells us, had great faith, we know that she is not of the right religious group, and all we know about what she believed was that she had come to discover that God took care of even the dogs that eat from the table.⁵ That was enough for Jesus to tell us that she was a woman of great faith. Both these people had beliefs that shaped their understanding in ways that were conducive to their coming to know God, and who they were in relationship to God.

What we believe is certainly important, but what is important is that our beliefs bring us to a better understanding of who God is and who we are in relationship to God. The Pharisees of Jesus' day had a religious faith that did just the opposite. They had a pride and confidence in their own understanding that closed them to the great understanding Jesus was offering.

By contrast, in the two instances above which Jesus calls great faith, both people had a humility that opened them to the possibility of God bringing them to an ever-greater understanding through which to interpret their God

3 Heb. 11:6.

4 Luke 7:2-10.

5 Mt. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30.

experiences. The Roman Centurion was in a place of authority, but rather than that creating a pride and confidence within him, it humbled him because he understood that his authority came from being under the greater authority of Rome. When he saw an even greater humility in Jesus, he knew that Jesus was under a greater authority than Rome.

Likewise, the Syrophenician woman was also humble enough to receive the revelation of God's mercy through dogs eating from the scraps of the table. Both were open to receiving God's revelation through the circumstances of their lives in ways that the Pharisees were not. The only authority the Pharisees were under was their own understanding, and they were certainly too proud to be taught by dogs.

With their own understanding as their only authority, the Pharisees lacked the humility that comes from being under authority and therefore were unable to recognize Jesus being under God's authority. Today, we should be in a better place than the Pharisees were, since we now know that there is nothing sacred about our understanding. Perhaps past generations of Christians, like the Pharisees, found it easy to believe that their beliefs and understanding represented some objective, sacred truth, but we are not so naïve today. Because of what we now know concerning the phenomenal or hermeneutical nature of our human experience, we should no longer be in a place of treating our own understanding with such reverence. This should open us to having our understanding changed by the things that Jesus said and did. We dub the process by which we come to that bet-

ter understanding, 'the hermeneutic circle'.

III The Hermeneutic Circle

The hermeneutic circle is the means to a more transparent interpretation. It begins with a suspicion concerning the understanding we bring to our experience. Without such a suspicion, we take the interpretation that our understanding creates as synonymous with the data of our experience. By doing so, our interpretation becomes irredeemable and it rather than God becomes the thing in which we place our faith and trust. Without a healthy suspicion of our own understanding, there is no spiritual journey into the great mystery of God's mercy. Without a suspicion of our own understanding, we, like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, suffered no self-doubt.

The Pharisees were convinced that their understanding was adequate and they knew all they needed to know concerning God and their relationship to him. By contrast, the people who did come to follow Jesus did not believe they understood all there was to know about God and therefore were open to Jesus' radical revelation. If faith is to produce an ever-greater understanding of God and ourselves, we must be like those followers of Jesus who had enough humility to suppose that their understanding was insufficient. It is only through a general suspicion or distrust concerning our understanding that we become open to having God change our understanding in order to bring us to an ever more fruitful interpretation.

By supposing that our understanding is always insufficient or that a 'non-

understanding is never eliminated,⁶ we open ourselves to future readings, which are always worthwhile if we bring an openness to those readings. By allowing the Gospel text to change our understanding, future readings are readings with a new understanding, which can produce more transparent and fruitful interpretations. Without openness to having our understanding corrected, future readings simply further confirm the prejudices that constitute our understanding, and their worth is only to reassure our egos of their rightness.

Of course, such openness could at times produce an understanding that yields a less transparent interpretation, but God can work with that and correct that misunderstanding as long as we stay open to having our understanding corrected. The point is not to be right and not make mistakes, but to stay on the journey and allow God to continue to draw us into an ever more fruitful understanding through which to interpret our God experiences.

This is the nature of the hermeneutic circle. It is a dialogue, in which we allow the text to correct our understanding and thereby provide new ways to conceptualize what we experience in the text. This should be our means of reading any worthwhile text or experience but it is especially appropriate for some ultimately worthwhile text like the Gospels. Unfortunately, this is not a very common practice.

The way most people read a text like the Sermon on the Mount is with very little suspicion concerning the understanding they bring to that text. They think their understanding is adequate and they have no great expectation of the text changing that understanding. They simply read it in a way that confirms all the prejudices they bring to the reading. If, however, they allow the radical teachings of Jesus to change their understanding, then the next reading will be with a new understanding, which, in turn, can produce a new and more transparent interpretation.

The spiritual journey into a more transparent interpretation of the gospel requires a great faith in the gospel and an equally great distrust toward our own understanding. Only then do we allow the text to do its job of changing our understanding in order to provide that deeper interpretation. This is what made the disciples or followers of Jesus different from the Pharisees. The Pharisees knew what they knew and nothing could change their understanding, which they mistook for sacred. Jesus' disciples, on the other hand, were constantly having their understanding challenged and changed by the things Jesus said and did.

If this was the kind of open faith to which Jesus called his disciples, then the very thing that keeps us from such a faith is the idea that faith is a matter of tenaciously clinging to a fixed and certain understanding. If we are truly to be followers of Jesus, the spiritual journey he calls us to will always challenge our understanding rather than reassure it. This is the nature of a spiritual journey and the nature of the

6 F. Schleiermacher, *Über den Begriff der Hermeneutik*, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. M. Frank (Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp, 1977), 328.

hermeneutic circle as well. Both require that we hold our understanding loosely in order that our ongoing God experiences provide us with an understanding that better replicates the Jesus perspective. The religious establishment of Jesus' day failed to realize the nature of the spiritual journey to which Jesus was calling them, and likewise, much of today's religious establishment fails to realize it as well.

All this is not to say that the initial understanding we bring to the data of our experience is unimportant. Without our initial understanding, wrong as it may be, we would have no orientation to the data at all. Without some kind of understanding, it would be difficult to extract any meaning from the Gospel text. Our initial understanding gives us an orientation and tells us what is important and what is not important.

When we were children, our parents and others oriented us by explaining what was important to focus on and what was not so important. When crossing a street some lights were important to focus on and some were not important. The red light that controlled the flow of traffic was important, and the street light that illumined the area was not something that we had to focus upon. We learned to focus on and highlight certain parts of our experience and ignore other parts.

If we were to take in everything without some orientation that allowed us to sort and prioritize things, life would be very difficult. As useful as this orientation is, however, we all too quickly come to imagine that the interpretation it provides represents an objective reality rather than a specific interpretation.

One of the great problems with fol-

lowing Jesus is that we all too easily come to take our initial orientation of the gospel as synonymous with the gospel itself. Therefore, we end up worshipping and trusting our initial understanding rather than allowing the gospel to draw us into the journey that brings us to know the great mystery that is God. Idolatry or worshipping something other than God has always been the great sin, perhaps it is the only sin, but it assumes many disguises that often make it hard to recognize as sin. The most deceptive disguise has always been that of religion, whereby religious doctrines masquerade as God. Thankfully, today this particular idolatry has been unmasked. We now know that we are interpretive beings, and that our historical, cultural, and linguistic perspective limits that interpretation. None of us can claim a God's-eye-view. We perceive things from within our particular journey and not from the perspective of eternity, as does God. Thus, the words of our religious doctrines may create metaphors that point toward God, but they can never adequately express the nature of an infinite and eternal God.

The best that true Christian religion can offer is an orientation or initial understanding that sets us on our spiritual journey. As we spend time in God's presence, our understanding is changed and we come to a better interpretation of the things that Jesus said and did. The journey brings us into a more transparent understanding; that is, one that reflects less our history, culture, and linguistic tradition, and is more reflective of Jesus' own perspective. Furthermore, the more we take on the Jesus' perspective, the better we are equipped to follow him and thereby

become ever more like him.

Of course, it is difficult to stay on such a journey. We all too easily fall prey to Gnosticism and after God changes our understanding a bit, we imagine that we now know all there is to know. We find great security in the sense that *we know*, and we choose to rest there rather than to continue on the journey. In order to remain on the journey into an ever-greater perspective from which to better interpret the gospel and the fullness of life God has for us, we constantly need to seek that place of deep prayer.

The reason prayer is so essential to staying on the journey is because there is a security that comes from sensing God's presence in prayer that allows us to let go of the false security that our understanding provides. Any deeper understanding requires that we see our present understanding as insufficient, but if people find security only in being certain about what they know, they will never let go of that understanding. In order to abandon the security we have in our understanding we must find a security apart from our understanding. The awareness of God's presence that we experience in deep prayer provides that security. It provides that peace that passes all understanding,⁷ and provides a security that our understanding never can.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.⁸

IV Our Hermeneutic Nature And The Biblical Revelation

We now know that we are interpretive beings and an objective understanding of anything, least of all an infinite and eternal God, is beyond us. Although we have only recently become aware of our hermeneutical nature, our human condition has always been hermeneutical and our history has always progressed through a hermeneutic circle. Unlike other creatures, we human beings have a history because our understanding changes over time and produces different interpretations of our experience.

Copernicus came to conceptualize his experience of the heavens differently from Ptolemy and he passed his understanding and interpretation on to us. Likewise, Albert Einstein had a different understanding of the physical universe from that of Isaac Newton and we are the heirs of Einstein's understanding and interpretation. In the same way, Jesus offers a better understanding through which to interpret our God experience than any understanding that had come before him.

Since we are hermeneutic creatures and we have a history because of our hermeneutic nature, it seems obvious that the biblical revelation would depict this hermeneutic and historical nature of our human condition. The Bible may be God's infallible revelation, but what God is revealing is how human beings experience God through their all too human understanding. As such, the biblical revelation is a progressive revelation because it begins in great misunderstanding, since our finite and temporal human understanding is ill equipped to interpret experiences with an infinite and eternal God.

7 Phil. 4:7.

8 Phil 4:7.

This infinite and eternal God, however, patiently works amid our misunderstanding in order to bring us to a better understanding, and eventually to the ultimate perspective, which is the Jesus revelation.

Sadly, such a view meets with great opposition from Gnosticism. As we said earlier, Gnosticism is the great heresy that has always plagued religion. In its modern form, Gnosticism insists that our knowledge of God be objective, certain, and precise, but that is part of an unholy desire to know as God knows. The eternal temptation that takes us out of a right place of humility before God is to believe the lie that we can know as God knows. We first believed that lie in The Garden,⁹ but we are finally in a place where we can see it for the lie it is. Our knowing will forever be an interpretation from our limited perspective, but as we stay humble and open, God can change our understanding in order to give us a more transparent interpretation of our God experiences.

The greatest opposition to this openness has always come from a religious establishment that claims to know all it needs to know. The religious leaders of Galileo's day insisted that they knew with objective certainty that the sun revolves around the earth. Objective certainty has always attracted religious types but it is antithetical to any genuine spiritual journey.

A genuine spiritual journey always requires openness to the better understanding God has for us. The religious

establishment is always opposed to such openness, so God usually works through the religious outsider. The founders of most religious orders, like the protestant reformers, and the desert fathers, were all initially either heretics or outsiders to the religious establishment. God has to work through the religious outsider because the religious establishment is always trying to protect the false security that comes from the understanding they set forth as sacred, while God is always trying to bring us to a better understanding.

The Jewish prophets all the way down to John the Baptist and Jesus are all killed because they tell the religious or political establishment that their understanding is wrong. The reason the Scripture is a progressive revelation is because the prophets defy the established understanding and present a better understanding through which to interpret our God experiences. Just as we in our intellectual history eventually yield to better ways to conceptualize and interpret our experience of the world, the Bible reveals a similar reluctant progression to an ever-better understanding through which to interpret our God experiences. As such, the Bible is God's revelation of the hermeneutical nature of our spiritual history. It is God's revelation of how human beings have interpreted their relationship with God, and how God patiently works within the development of human consciousness to bring us to a better understanding through which to realize an ever-greater intimacy with him.

People who are on a genuine spiritual journey should have little problem accepting such a view of Scripture

⁹ Gen. 3:1-5.

since it mirrors what they have experienced in their own personal relationship with God. With our first God experiences, like those first experiences depicted in the biblical revelation, we almost all begin with an understanding of a wrathful and punishing God who must be appeased. God's desire, however, is that we would eventually come to interpret our God experiences through an understanding of God as a loving father who desires mutual indwelling. Of course, such a different interpretation of our God experience can happen only if we are open to having our understanding changed.

Most of us are open to having our understanding changed, at least to some degree. We are able to adapt to the new understandings that Copernicus and Einstein offer. As long as the changes are not too drastic, we can accommodate them and reinterpret the world through such a new understanding. When we encounter an understanding too drastic, however, we simply reject it as radical and too far from the norm to be something we can use in order to create a viable interpretation for ourselves.

Sadly, the understanding that the Jesus revelation offers is just such an understanding. The Jesus perspective does not offer a modification to our understanding the way that Copernicus or Einstein had, but it threatens to obliterate it and replace it with something so divinely alien that we balk—it is simply too much for us.

V The Jesus Revelation

The Jesus revelation is so radical that rather than accept it as the ultimate perspectival understanding from

which to interpret our experiences with God, we fall back upon theories that suppress the Jesus revelation. We adopt a theory about all of Scripture being the objective revelation of who God is so that the words of Jesus must conform to the rest of Scripture. We insist upon imagining that the Scripture is a revelation of God's objective nature, so that the Jesus revelation is no different from the revelations of Moses and David. We want to believe that all of Scripture is a revelation of who God objectively is so we can balance the words of Jesus with the rest of Scripture.

Thus, when Jesus tells us to love our enemies in order that we might be like God who is 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked',¹⁰ we can point to other portions of Scripture where God seems to be telling us to kill our enemies, even their women and children.¹¹ Whenever Jesus says something too radically divine for us, we reference another Scripture that says the very opposite. We suppress the words of Jesus by making his words conform to the rest of Scripture, instead of making the rest of Scripture conform to his words.

We do this so we can imagine that sometimes what Jesus says is the prescription for our lives but sometimes God's prescription is just the opposite. This gives us the option of deciding whether this is a time for loving our enemies or killing our enemies.

When the words of Jesus contradict other portions of Scripture, we who

¹⁰ Luke 6:35.

¹¹ Joshua 6:21.

consider ourselves Christians almost always side against the words of Jesus. When Jesus says, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and child, brother and sister, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple,'¹² we quickly point to other portions of Scripture in order to show that Jesus did not really mean what he said. Instead of treating the words of Jesus as sacred, it is our theory about God's revelation being a revelation of objective reality that we hold as sacred. Thankfully, today a belief that objective reality is something to which we have access is indefensible and we can no longer use such a theory to suppress the words of Jesus.

With such a theory debunked, we are now free to see the Jesus revelation as the ultimate understanding through which we should interpret our God experiences. Jesus' interpretation of his God experiences should provide the benchmark by which we can determine whether other portions of Scripture represent a more or less transparent interpretation of the God experiences recorded there. Simply put, the portions of Scripture that conform to the gospel are the better interpretations of God's communion with human beings, and those that oppose what the gospel reveals are interpretation formed out of a more human and less divine understanding.

Of course, some continue to believe that God can bypass the understanding through which we humans process our experience and give us purely objective revelations—that is, all God and noth-

ing of us. Since we now know that God did not do that with the natural revelation, and we do not see the sun going around the earth, as we once believed, why would we believe that the Scripture is an objective revelation?

I think the answer to that question is twofold. First, it gives us a way to neutralize the Jesus revelation by making the more palatable revelations of Moses, Joshua, or David as much an objective revelation of God's nature as the Jesus revelation. Second, it allows those who claim that God communicates to them in such a direct way to suffer no self-doubt. It gives them a sense of certainty and thus the confidence in their own understanding that their egos crave. Jesus, however, calls us to just the opposite. If we are to follow him, we must hold our interpretation loosely and trust not in our own understanding¹³ but allow the gospel to change our understanding and bring us to a more transparent interpretation of what Jesus is revealing.

As we have said, this is not easy to do. We crave certainty and we fear a loss of understanding. What Jesus offers is neither the certainty we crave nor an understanding that we can easily grasp. In fact, Jesus calls us into a mystery that we come to know only as we spend time in God's presence. Without that experience, we will always seek our security in the belief that our understanding is certain. Only the experience of God's presence in prayer brings us to find our security in the mystery of God's mercy rather than our own understanding.

12 Luke 14:26.

13 Prov. 3:5.

Contextualizing the Structure of Systematic Theology in Africa

Andrew Wildsmith

KEYWORDS: *Theological education, pastoral issues, Christian relationships, salvation, vernacular theology*

I Another Frontier in Contextualization

Most theological educators in Africa accept the need to contextualize the content of theology when training their students. Dorothy and Earle Bowen, followed by Ugandan Elie Buconyori, pioneered the contextualization of educational methods in theological education in Africa. Richard Seed provided further depth in this area more recently.¹ This essay suggests that contextualizing the structure of sys-

tematic theology in Africa is also needed in theological training.

Timothy Tennent, as part of an essay on the emerging contours of global theology that includes advocating the reintegration of biblical/exegetical, systematic, historical and practical theology, concludes that different cultures reason and process information so differently from the West that

We cannot, therefore, assume that the way systematic theology has been traditionally structured and presented throughout the history of Western civilization is the most logical, the most effective, or the only way in which theology can be systematically structured for the larger global context.²

This essay intends to be at least as radical as Tennent who believes:

- 'that every church in the world needs a systematic introduction to biblical themes that will best help and guide them in formulat-

¹ Dorothy N. and Earle A. Bowen, 'Theological Education and Learning Styles in Africa', *Theological News* Vol. 18, No. 1 Jan-Mar (1986), 5-8. Elie A. Buconyori, *Cognitive Styles and Development of Reasoning among Younger African Students in Christian Higher Education* (EdD thesis; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1991). Richard E. Seed, *The Relationship Between Goals of Theological Education and Learning Practices* (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2007).

² Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 253.

ing ethical, cultural, and practical applications of theology’.

- ‘No single systematic theology can be held up as universally adequate for all Christians’,
- ‘Theological textbooks must become more contextually sensitive without losing sight of the grand universal themes that unite all Christians through time and space’.³

In a personal communication, Dr. Tennent defines the ‘grand universal themes that unite all Christians through time and space’ as,

the great unfolding *missio dei* which stretches from creation to fall to covenant to incarnation to cross and resurrection to Pentecost to Return of Christ and finally to the New Creation. That grand narrative is the superstructure or meta-narrative [out] of which all theology (however it is organized or arranged) must ultimately flow. The wonderful confessional evidence is that whether Africans or Chinese or Americans are reading the Bible, they may organize it quite differently, but we don’t have substantial disagreements about the meta-narrative structure of the grand story itself.⁴

Tennent’s book goes on to discuss with approval veteran SIM missionary Wilbur O’Donovan’s *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* as a model of a systematic theology which not only

includes traditional western theological categories, but also explores many issues that are relevant for ministry in Africa.⁵ This essay suggests a more radical departure from traditional western categories for systematic theology than O’Donovan’s.

II Powerless Theology

The type of re-structuring that I suggest could be considered a form of the reintegration of the theological disciplines as suggested by Tennent. The main advantage to contextualising the structure of theology would be that it helps students to connect more closely important theological concepts with real ministry needs. The following story illustrates what happens when African pastors fail to integrate important theological concepts into their pastoral ministry.

The small mission-founded church congregation in south-eastern Nigeria meets in a member’s front room on the first Sunday of the new year. They stand to repeat in unison their denomination’s doctrinal statement of faith. The ceremony reaffirms the people’s commitment to the doctrines brought by the first European missionaries and reinforced through the catechism taught to each child who becomes a baptised church member.

Under cover of darkness that same Sunday night in another rural part of the state, an elder in the same denomination makes his way to a diviner’s house. He has never done this before

³ All three quotes come from Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 258.

⁴ Personal email to the author dated, 10 June 2010.

⁵ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 258.

and he does not like doing it now, but his only son is very sick. Constant prayer and numerous trips to the mission hospital have failed. Repeated efforts to name and claim his son's healing as a television evangelist preached also failed. Even several trips to a charismatic prayer house have brought no improvement. The elder knows that in consulting a traditional diviner he is being disloyal to Christ and that his church will discipline him if he is caught. They will accuse him of backsliding into paganism. That is why he comes 'Nicodemusly'—at night as the Pharisee and Sanhedrin member Nicodemus did when he talked with Jesus about being born again (John 3:1-21).

But the elder does not think of himself as turning his back on Christianity. He is simply looking for someone with the power to heal his son—the son who represents his continuing family line, a culturally compelling form of personal immortality. He does not know what else to do or where else to turn because the doctrinal statements that he too recited this morning do not tell him how to act like a Christian in this situation. Advice from his sympathetic pastor was no help. Trust God, remain firm in the faith, keep praying and accept God's will, whatever it might be. The elder was afraid that God's will in this case was death for his son. To simply accept that his son's death was the will of God was too hard for him without trying all the sources of power available in his worldview. So he sneaks off to the diviner's house and slips inside.

My point is not that Christianity in Africa is a mile wide and an inch deep. Anyone who knows African Christians

knows that the African church has more than her share of heroes of the faith who make many western Christians look as shallow as the over generalization found in the previous sentence. My point is that the elder's pastor probably feels as powerless as the elder and for the same reason. After years of schooling in the western theological tradition, he simply does not have a convincing answer to his elder's problem. He knows rule number one—in this fallen world people die, even the only sons of normally faithful elders. He knows rule number two—pastors, even pastors who walk closely with God, cannot change rule number one. But if his western based theology has no power to change the rules, it also has too little power to help his elder deal with his son's sickness and impending death in a Christian as well as an African way.

When we approach the pastoral problem faced by the African elder and his pastor in terms of the relationships involved in their operational world views, we can analyse the problem beyond its surface issues, or presenting problems. As Hiebert notes, 'we must master the skill of human exegesis as well as biblical exegesis to meaningfully communicate the gospel in human contexts'.⁶ At heart what causes the elder to go knowingly astray is not his son's sickness, the quality of his loyalty to Christ or even the belief (or desperate hope) that the diviner can help solve the problem. The core issue is the elder's 'unconverted'

⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 12.

view of his own personal immortality.

The sick child is his son, his only son. Sons are essential to an African man's sense of personal immortality. African Traditional Religion is focused on this life, and a man's sense of personal immortality is found in continuing the family line, and not simply for sentimental reasons; continuing his family line is his familial responsibility. 'Do you want your family line to end with you?' is the rhetorical question from family that urges a man to settle down, marry and have children, especially sons. It is the question that relatives pose when his wife is not producing children, especially sons, as they suggest polygamy as the traditional, rational solution. A man lives on in the memory of his descendants.

It is hard for Westerners to grasp the power of that component in the traditional African worldview. Many African Christians continue to operate with that and many other aspects of the traditional worldview alongside their Christianity.⁷ Those non-Christian aspects of the traditional worldview that have not yet been 'converted' are a serious challenge to the African church. This approach sees conversion as an ongoing process rather than a one-time decision. Although another name for this process is 'sanctification', conversion highlights the turn from the old ATR way of thinking to the new Christian way of thinking.

⁷ See Yusufu Turaki, 'Evangelical missiology from Africa: strengths and weaknesses' in William D. Taylor, ed., *Global Missiology for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 281 for an example of this common idea.

Romans 12:1-2 sees the same process and calls it being 'transformed by the renewing of your mind'.⁸

III The Power of Contextualized Theology

But traditional Christianity has a large 'next life' emphasis, and it is this component that would enable the elder to leave his son's earthly fate in God's hands. From the orthodox, evangelical Christian point of view, the elder's hope of personal immortality is not wrapped up in his son's earthly survival. It is wrapped up in God's Son who defeated death and rose from the grave and who lives today. Because he lives, the Christian also has the hope of eternal life—not the bodiless existence of the Greek-inspired western version of heaven, but the biblical vision of the new heavens and the new earth with its lions and lambs, its children playing in safety, its incorruptible, spiritual body that experiences a life of eternal and perfect relationships with God and others. The Christian heaven is the true fulfilment and replacement for the ATR 'village of the dead'. It also replaces the continuation of the family line as the ultimate form of personal immortality. As good as continuing the family line is, the promise of eternal life is the ultimate fulfilment of that hope.

The pastor's job is not to falsely promise that the elder's son will recover or to offer the powerless counsel of 'Pray, trust God, and accept whatever

⁸ See Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 28.

God decides'. The pastor's job is to preach, teach and demonstrate that it is not only this life that matters (and it does matter), but that, for the Christian, it ends, not in the silence of the grave, but in the joy of heaven. The destiny of every Christian is personal immortality within a heavenly Christian community where there is no more death, sorrow, and pain. Whenever he dies and his son dies, the elder will one day see his Christian son again, and it is the power of this truth that enables him to turn away from the diviner's door.

Other questions of causality and power in the spiritual realm, especially in terms of healing, and other issues surrounding marriage and family also need deeper analysis than pastoral students often get in their Bible college classrooms.

Paul Hiebert (a Protestant) and Peter Gichure (a Roman Catholic) argue for the need to deal with local, non-western Christian situations in a new way, using 'missional theology' and 'contextual theology' respectively. Gichure illuminates the historical changes that have taken place in Roman Catholic theology. Hiebert describes the limitations in western theology that are the inevitable result of doing theology in a particular time and culture.⁹ Let us hasten to say that the problem is not with western theology as such. After all, why should we expect western theology, developed

and refined over centuries in response to changing conditions and worldviews in Europe and the Americas, to satisfy all the needs in cultures with very different conditions and worldviews? The theology is not at fault, but the way that theology is now organized and the way it is usually presented are not helpful enough for many African pastors to make easy use of theological truths in many ministry situations.

Nor should we blame the early missionaries for bringing a form of Christianity that was uniquely their own. What other form did they have? None. Christianity and Christian theology do not exist apart from culture. All forms of Christianity and all forms of Christian theology are culturally specific. When the early western missionaries brought the gospel to Africa, the modern notions of anthropology, multiculturalism and missiology had not yet been invented. The wonder is not that western missionaries brought western theology, culture and commerce, but that Africans came to Christ in such huge numbers and so relatively quickly in spite of this. One African Christian laywoman, grateful for missionaries and their efforts, told me that the problem was not that missionary theology was wrong, it's that it was incomplete. 'African theologians are agreed that Christian theology in Africa stands in need of a new approach, a new method, that will not be determined by "white" or "European" presuppositions.'¹⁰

⁹ Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 39-44. Peter I. Gichure, *Contextual Theology: Its Meaning, Scope and Urgency* (Nairobi: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2008), 25-58.

¹⁰ John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 194. See also Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 11.

IV Bible Translation and Contextualization

One important reason for Christianity's popularity in Africa is that many of the early missionaries followed the centuries old tradition of translating the Bible into vernacular languages.¹¹ As they learned African languages they quickly saw that they had to deal with African cultures. Christianity became a religion of the heart in Africa because Africans of many different ethnic groups could say along with the audience on the day of Pentecost, 'We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues' (Acts 2:11). One gets the feeling that even if missionaries had limited themselves to Bible translation, Christianity would be at least as firmly established in Africa as it now is, though perhaps in very different forms.

Translating western theology textbooks is widely acknowledged to be no final answer. The fact that pastoral and theological education in Africa is usually conducted in western languages, especially English, rather than Africa's many vernaculars may be one major reason why our pastor could not help his elder with his situation. The Bible is translatable and when properly translated it bears in embryonic form the seeds of a home grown theology. So far written (as opposed to oral) theology in African mother tongues is still largely stillborn¹² though the recent

translation of the Africa Bible Commentary into Kiswahili is a hopeful sign. Other mother tongue theological expression is going on elsewhere.¹³

In contrast with very low-level Bible schools, secondary level and tertiary level pastoral education in Africa's theological schools will not take place in Africa's vernacular languages until there are written mother tongue theologies. When this occurs, will not such home grown theological textbooks benefit from, even require, substantial changes in their table of contents to deal with African pastoral issues? For example, would a biblical theology of ancestors fall under biblical anthropology, or personal eschatology? Where would you place a discussion of what the bible says about clapping hands in church? Is there a place within the western structure of systematic theology that could deal with whether or not bringing a dead body into the church building as part of the funeral rites is desecrating the house of the Lord? These are all pastoral issues I have had to deal with in response to various tensions in mission-founded churches.

Revising the western structure of the systematic theology taught in Africa's Bible colleges seems inevitable. Perhaps the greatest danger in teaching western systematic theology in Africa is that the traditional focus on abstraction and rational

11 See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 1989 for a full discussion of the impact of Bible translations.

12 Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 17.

13 Miriam Adeney, 'The Weakest Feature in Our Work' in *Global Missiology*, April 2006, <http://www.globalmissiology.org/english/archive/adenev_weakest_featur...> accessed 2 Aug 2010.

coherence has often turned teaching it into an intellectual exercise remote from the African Christian's everyday issues.¹⁴ It is not that the western eschatology the African pastor learned was wrong. In agreement with biblical tradition, that theology taught that God's people will inherit a new heavens and a new earth when Jesus returned. But the pastor never learned how to connect that truth to the everyday choices and issues he and his church faced because he was never shown how to do that, nor was he taught that he needed to do it. The systematic theology he inherited did not help him in his hour of need when his elder came to him for help in healing his sick son. This is because the way theological truth was structured isolated it from the real life ministry situation that the pastor faced. Reintegrating theological truths with pastoral ministry seems the obvious solution, as Tennent advocates, but that means dismantling the western structure in favour of one that is able to directly connect biblical truths with African pastoral issues.

V NT Writers Contextualise Theology

The New Testament writers also taught theology without being dependent on a western systematic structure. Instead we see the NT writers, including Paul, creating theology as they dealt with actual issues and situations in the church's life. 'Any study of the Pauline epistles must begin with

the fact that Paul was writing to real life situations.'¹⁵ The New Testament letters are examples of theology at its best, applied to specific issues that churches and their leaders encountered in their ministries and on-going relationships.

Modern theologians tell us that all theology is occasional—it grows out of real pastors facing real pastoral occasions in their church ministry.¹⁶ Why should theologians working in Africa not bring biblical truth to bear on pastoral issues in imitation of the New Testament? It seems that the most practical and relevant approach to teaching theology in Africa starts with the pastoral issues of concern to church members today as illustrated by the story that is near the beginning of this essay. Eventually an indigenous system of theology will develop out of this interaction of biblical truth and vernacular pastoral issues.

VI Life-Transforming Theological Structure

If we dismantle the traditional structure of western systematic theology in order to focus on pastoral issues, we

¹⁴ Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 41.

¹⁵ Brian Wintle, 'Doing Theology in Context: A Biblical Case Study', in Sunand Sumithra, ed., *Doing Theology in Context* (Bangalore, India: Theological Book Trust, 1992), 13.

¹⁶ Tite Tienou, *The Theological Task of the Churches in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1990), 50, 'good theology always arises out of emergency situations'. See also Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw, Tite Tienou, eds., *Issues in African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 3-11, and Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 10.

still need some kind of framework in which to teach theology in Africa today. I will develop an example of what this framework could look like by adapting Andrew Walls' indigenizing and pilgrim principles in church history¹⁷ to restructuring the framework of theology in Africa. The indigenising principle links Christians with the particulars of their culture and ethnic group while the pilgrim principle reminds them that in this life they have no abiding city, and that loyalty to Christ will sometimes put them out of step with their culture and ethnic group.

Walls' indigenising principle assumes that God accepts us into his family as we are, with all our social relationships, both functional and dysfunctional, while his pilgrim principle rests on the fact that God accepts us as we are in order to transform us into what he wants us to be, namely Christ-like. Therefore Christians must learn how to function in their own culture without becoming so immersed in it that the transformation towards Christlikeness is halted and reversed.

The indigenising and pilgrim principles are in tension, not in opposition or balance. According to Walls, 'We need not fear getting too much of one or the other, only too little.'¹⁸ He points out two dangers of having no tension. First, when a church so indigenises the Christian faith that it cannot be challenged by it (when there is no pilgrim principle at work), then Christianity is turned into mere civil religion. Second,

when a church focuses on 'a set of requirements and inhibitions that arise from the Christian history of another community' (when there is no indigenising principle at work), then it has fallen into sectarianism.¹⁹ The pilgrim principle is a force that tends to universalise the vision of the church, while the indigenising principle tends to localise it.²⁰ These could therefore be referred to as universalising forces and localising forces.

The necessary tension between these two principles in church history is analogous to the tension inherent in Jesus' prayer for his followers where he knows that they will have to remain in the world after he ascends to his father's presence, but that at the same time they also are not of the world any more than he is (John 17:13-22). To maintain a healthy tension of being in the world (not disconnected from it, but immersed in it) but also not of the world (not having a worldly nature controlling them, but living in the light of the gospel), Jesus' followers need truth to guide them. They need theological truths that are not only true (heaven is real), but also relevant and powerful enough (therefore the death of your believing son is not the end of his existence or of yours) to encourage believers to take a difficult step of faith that leads them beyond their traditional world view towards a Christian world view.

¹⁷ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7-9.

¹⁸ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 54.

¹⁹ Personal e-mail from Prof. Walls to A. Wildsmith, 12 August, 1998.

²⁰ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 53-54.

VII Individual Building Blocks

In terms of theology for pastoral education, the most important cornerstone, the most important universalizing force, is the Bible. In particular, it is the story of salvation from creation to re-creation that hinges on the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gospel story that ushers in the beginning of the re-creation that will be consummated at Jesus' second coming. This meta-narrative underlies the individual examples of Paul's theologizing in his letters, and it is the basis for our own theologizing today.²¹ African scholars from many traditions point to Scripture as the most important source for doing theology in Africa today, even if they disagree on how it should be used, and come up with widely differing theological conclusions.²²

Evangelicals take the Bible as the Word of God written under the inspiration, but not dictation, of the Holy Spirit by chosen people who employed their own words and literary styles (2

Peter 1:21 and 2 Tim. 3:16).²³ The Bible shows us God's point of view on relationships between human beings and God, and amongst human beings themselves. It can be thought of as God's 'case book' on how to conduct (and how not to conduct) relationships. When we interpret and apply it carefully, it gives us a divine perspective on the life of faith in every context.

From the evangelical perspective, the Bible is our primary resource and our ultimate authority for evaluating any theology. It therefore is the force that provides the universalizing tension in constructing theologies for a particular culture. It is also a localizing force because its divinely inspired and authoritative test cases for relationships are always played out in specific historical and cultural contexts. As God gives his judgments on these specific cases in specific times and cultures (David is wrong to seduce Bathsheba and arrange her husband's death), we learn how to apply those lessons to our own times and cultures, either directly or indirectly.

It is the Bible's specific cases that make it a localizing force and its divine inspiration and authority that make it our premier universalising force. The story of salvation provides the overall theological context within which African pastoral students at the diploma and degree level, as field-dependent learners,²⁴ can place the ele-

²¹ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Leicester: Apolllos IVP, 2005), 95-96, 117.

²² For examples, see John Pobee, 'The Sources of African Theology' in John Parrat, ed., *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (New Edition) (London: SPCK, 1997), 25; Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz, *The Bible in a World Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), viii; and the very presence of books such as Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, *The Bible in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) and Phillip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²³ See for example, Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 26.

²⁴ See endnote 1 above regarding the Bowens' and Buconyori's work on learning styles.

ments of theology they use to deal with the pastoral issues they will face.

The second universalizing 'force' at work in constructing any local theology is the Holy Spirit because he lives in believers, yet also calls us away from the attitudes of the world towards Christlikeness. The Spirit can guide believers as they construct theology and any successful attempt will agree with biblical revelation.

Perhaps the most important localizing forces are the pastoral issues confronting Christians in Africa. Specific issues grow out of the context within which African theology is done. The editors of *Issues in Christian Theology* illustrate this context by describing the three worlds of Mumo, a representative Bible college student: *the world of Christian faith, the world of African culture, and the world of modern culture.*²⁵ These worlds or contexts are the sources of the various pastoral issues African pastors encounter as they minister.

The first context or source is *the world of Christian faith*, the Church. African believers may have grown up with theologies through Protestant, Catholic, Pentecostal or Orthodox churches or missions agencies or the various Africa Initiated Churches. Pastoral ministries students do not come to a training institution as empty vessels, but they come with their inherited beliefs and practices. As they learn more about the faith as it is expressed in their own tradition, they should also be made aware of the expressions of

faith other Christians have developed.

The worldwide church has already developed many theological traditions that can also be mined for solutions to various African issues. These historical traditions are also under the authority of Scripture in evangelical theology. Church traditions, including the practice and theology of those traditions, provide Africans with examples of how other Christians have contextualized their Christianity, but cannot serve as infallible models to follow.

The second context or source is *the world of African culture*, or African Traditional Religion. Many pastoral issues, especially issues of identity, arise out of Africa's religious past. Andrew Walls, referring to the main preoccupation of African theologians in the 1960s and 1970s, says, 'All are wrestling with a theological question, the prime one on the African Christian's intellectual agenda: who am I? What is my relation as an African Christian to Africa's past?'²⁶ My own research over the past twenty five years indicates that many aspects of African worldviews continue to exercise a powerful influence in the lives of believers today, often without them being consciously aware of the fact.²⁷ The story of the desperate church elder with the sick son is a case in point.

The third context or source is *the world of modern culture* which also includes aspects of post-modern cul-

25 Ngewa, Shaw, Tienou, eds., 'Introduction: The Three Worlds of Mumo' in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, xi-xiv.

26 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 13.

27 Andrew Wildsmith, *Pastoral Issues in the Annang, Ibibio And Igbo Sections of the Qua Iboe Church of Nigeria*, an unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1998.

ture. Many important pastoral and theological issues arise, as Pobee mentions above, 'in the flux and turmoil of our time'. Some of them can be found, for example, in Wilbur O'Donovan's, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa*.²⁸

Professor Jesse Mugambi is passionately concerned that African Christianity engages in the social reconstruction of Africa, ridding the continent of its many social ills through the application of Reconstruction Theology.²⁹ A great many church members have definite opinions on the question of whether or not ordained ministers should run for political office, but the relationship of Christianity and the state goes far beyond this particular topic. The role of the church in response to ethnic conflict in Rwanda and Kenya and the recurring civil strife between Muslims and Christians in central Nigeria are among the burning issues that need to be addressed in church pulpits and Bible College classrooms.

VIII A New African Theological Structure

Teaching the story of salvation is the theological core, the foundation of pastoral education, the theological grid through which students view African pastoral issues. This story is in tension with the worlds or contexts that give rise to the pastoral issues. If this dis-

cussion puts into place the building blocks for a new structure of systematic theology for teaching African pastoral students today, then what sort of new structure could possibly replace the existing western structure of theology proper, bibliology, christology, ecclesiology and so on?

Anyone who has attempted to deal with this issue probably finds that it is a struggle to come up with a structure that facilitates the integration of theological truths with students' daily life and the lives of their members. The following framework for theology courses was developed in the context of our college's curriculum review several years ago. Both missionary and Kenyan faculty were involved and it took the combined efforts of all of us to develop a different structure. Ultimately, that structure was not implemented because of changes in personnel.

A contextualized African theological structure could be based on the pastoral issues that deal with living relationships rather than a series of abstract concepts divorced from ministry situations. Relationships are very important in Africa and Christianity. Esther Kibor independently notes that Christian educator Friedrich Froebel's 'goal for education is stated in terms of a relationship with God'.³⁰ It does not seem a big jump to a new theological structure based on relationships. After all, did not Jesus himself designate loving relationships to be the greatest commandment (Mark 12:30-31)? If

²⁸ O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa*, 218-317.

²⁹ For an introduction to this designated successor to Liberation Theology, see J.N.K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003).

³⁰ Esther J. Kibor, 'The Impact of Friedrich Froebel on Education Through the 19th and 20th Centuries' in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 23.2, 2004, 190.

Christians are destined for an eternity of fellowship with each other in the presence of God, should not we be practising for that while we are here on earth? And should not we be thinking theologically in an effort to do this more adequately?

Christian relationships can be depicted in the form of a triangle. The left side of the triangle represents the relationship between the individual and God. The relationship between the individual and various groups such as the family, church, community, nation and so on is the base. The right side of the triangle represents the relationship between the group and God.

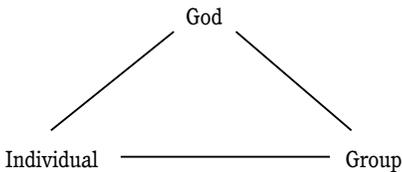


Figure 1

If these are the types of issues and 'worlds' and ministry contexts that African Bible colleges need to deal with, and if relationship-oriented theology is the best way of dealing with these issues, then the relationships suggested by the 'God-Individual-Group' triangle shown in Figure 1 could be organized in the following way.

The triangle illustration suggests three theological core course titles:

Theological Issues 1:

God Transforms Individuals

Theological Issues 2:

God Transforms Human Relationships in Society

Theological Issues 3:

God Transforms Society Through the Church

Following the lead of the New Testament writers, I suggest we focus the actual lesson content of these three courses on the existing pastoral issues found amongst church members. Individual Bible colleges or divinity faculties could devise their own list of pastoral issues and revise them as the church and culture change. The following example selects and organizes some likely pastoral issues in a large evangelical, non-charismatic, mission-founded church. For purposes of illustration we assume that each of these three core courses is a 3 credit hour course for a school year with three terms and ten weeks of actual teaching in each term. The bare bones course outlines could look something like this:

Theological Issues 1: God Transforms Individuals (27-30 class periods)

God as Our Loving Heavenly Father (6 class periods)

Salvation by Grace Through Faith and Its Relationship to Good Works (3 class periods)

Baptism and Catechism—who should be baptized and when? (3 class periods)

Our Place in Building the Kingdom of God (3 class periods)

Christian Attitudes to Healing and Wealth (6 class periods)

- evaluating the health and wealth gospel

- developing a theology of suffering, poverty, contentment

Spiritual Freedom in Christ—dealing with 'demonization' (3 class periods)

Curses, Charms and Other Forms of Spiritual Power (3 class periods)

Theological Issues 2: God Transforms Human Relationships in Society
(27-30)

Jesus Through African Eyes—truly God and truly Man (3 class periods)

Ethnic Communities and Christian Unity (3 class periods)

Righteousness and Justice in an Unrighteous and Unjust World (6 class periods)

Marriage and Family—polygamy, divorce, raising children etc. (6 class periods)

Men and Women in Biblical and Cultural Perspective (6 class periods)

Leadership Roles for Women in the Church (3 class periods)

Theological Issues 3: God Transforms Society Through the Church
(27-30 classes)

The Holy Spirit as a Person not as Power (3 class periods)

Power for Christian Living—causality and power (3 class periods)

Salvation and Sin in Cultural and Biblical Perspective (3 class periods)

Funerals, Culture and Status (3 class periods)

Heaven and the Ideal Life (3 class periods)

Secularism in Society and the Church (6 class periods)

Jesus, the Hope of the World: A Theology of Hope for Africa (3 class periods)

The content of these three courses cannot be explained in detail here, and in any case, they are designed to be suggestive of a new way forward, not the blueprint of a final product. Any number of other issues could be added to or

replace the ones suggested. In addition, a topic in one course might be better placed in another course. Thus one advantage of this framework is flexibility that allows for regional or denominational refinements. It is obviously not a system or anything close to a systematic theology. It is not meant to be. It is only a suggested framework.

IX The Theological Framework

This suggested framework covers as many of the most urgent issues that can be addressed in three three-credit-hour courses. An issues-oriented approach to teaching theology provides the localizing force needed to help Christians live in the world. But without the corresponding tension of the universalizing force of the Bible, African pastoral students lack the power to transform their lives towards Christlikeness and refine their cultures so they become a bit more like the new earth promised at the end of time.

Therefore it is necessary to teach the Bible as the story of salvation from creation to re-creation as a foundational course before embarking on the Theological Issues courses suggested above. This would include a theology of the Bible and the three-term story of salvation as outlined below. This approach provides a basic introduction to each biblical book within the chronologically told story of salvation as well as a very brief survey of the expansion of the church across the globe. Obviously a great deal of detail would have to be left out. This introductory course would then be followed by the three

core pastoral issues theology courses in the second year. This introductory course would form the basis upon which any other Bible and theology courses could be built.

An Introduction to the Bible and the Story of Salvation It Tells

The Nature of the Bible—God's Case Book for Following Jesus (3 class periods)

Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible (3 class periods)

The Role of Theology and Faith in Following Jesus (3 class periods)

The Story of Salvation Told in 12 Ages from Creation to Re-creation (the rest of the first school year)

1. The Age of Beginnings (Genesis 1-11)
2. The Age of the Patriarchs (Genesis 12-50)
3. The Age of the Exodus and Conquest (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua)
4. The Age of the Judges (Judges, Ruth)
5. The Age of the United Kingdom (1, 2 Samuel; 1 Kings 1:1-12:24; 1 Chronicles—2 Chronicles 11:4, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs)
6. The Age of the Divided Kingdom (1 Kings 12-22, 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles 10-36, Isaiah, Lamentations, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah)
7. The Age of the Babylonian Exile (Ezekiel, Daniel)
8. The Post-Exilic Age (Joel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)
9. The Age of Christ on Earth (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)

10. The Age of the Apostolic Church (Acts, the rest of the New Testament)

11. The Age of the Church

12. The Endless Age

X Defending the New Approach

By this time a number of readers, especially western and western trained theologians and educators, may be sceptical or cautious of this approach while others may be excited by its possibilities. Three missionaries and a class of students taking Contemporary Theology in Africa were kind enough to read and comment on an earlier version of this essay and all their comments were helpful. I hope others will feel free to comment on it as well and make suggestions for further improvement.

Two further questions arise.

1) Is it wise to abandon all the theological categories included in the traditional western structure in favour of such an untried approach?

2) Does this African issues oriented approach not leave the student without a 'system', an organizational structure for his theology?

In answer to question one, first let me make clear the fact that I am not questioning the theological truths found in western theologies. I am not saying Africans should re-invent the Trinity or examine whether or not Jesus is fully God and fully human. I am asking that we look for a better way to connect theological truths to the realities of African life and ministry. I believe we need a new structure to help do that. Other ways of re-framing theology exist, such as collecting pastoral

issues under traditional categories and then adding specifically African categories for other pastoral issues left over. Some of my students suggested that these three Theological Issues courses be taught in addition to the traditional western courses.

Secondly, we can ask a counter question, 'Where did this elaborate western theological structure come from?' Very briefly, it developed as theologians wrestled with past issues that came up as a result of the interaction of the gospel with western cultures. Many of these issues were inherited from the entry of the gospel into Greek and Roman culture in the first centuries of Christian history and culminated in the decisions of the early church taken in the first four Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea (325 AD), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451)).³¹

Therefore, if all relevant theology is occasional (ie, if it grows out of real pastors facing real pastoral occasions in their ministry in the church), then African theology needs to develop its own answers to its own questions. This is not a new notion. Richard Gehman states what many others have seen for many years:

The African Christian Church has unique problems which are not faced by any other church in the same manner. Therefore, the

African Christian Church must seek from God in the Scriptures through the illumination of the Holy Spirit the resolution to those problems.³²

In regard to the second question, it is clear that a different structure for Christian theology in Africa will begin without a 'system'. But African students beginning pastoral training do not always need to possess a closely defined and closed theological system in order to function because they can make do with less systematization and precision than westerners.³³ Perceived contradictions need to be addressed, but systemization is not required. The structure they will use to make sense of the individual theological issues is found in the story of salvation. Just as the current western system was not built in a day, so too it will take time for an African system of theology to emerge.³⁴

This attitude to western systematic theologies is different from Tite Tienou and Paul Hiebert who wish to retain both systematic theology and biblical theology and add missional theology to the arsenal of approaches used by missionaries and missiologists. They view

31 See Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992) for a comparison of how these early church fathers and African theologians today wrestle with applying the gospel to their cultures.

32 Richard J. Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1987), p. 23. See also Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 196-197 and Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 119.

33 Eunice Okorochoa, 'Cultural Issues and the Biblical Message', in Tokunboh Adeyemo ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1467-1468.

34 Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 197.

all three approaches as complementary.³⁵ As Hiebert notes,

The strength of systematic theology is its examination of the fundamental elements and categories in Scripture. It gives us a standard to test our knowledge and helps us to understand in some measure the biblical worldview—the view of reality as God sees it and as he has revealed it to us in Scripture.³⁶

Among the several weaknesses of systematic theology discussed by Tienou and Hiebert is their statement that systematic theology was a product and reflection of western intellectual history. They go on to affirm that, ‘All theologies are human creations seeking to understand divine revelation, and all theologies are embedded in histories and worldviews that shape the way they see things’.³⁷ Does that not include all forms of systematic theology? If so, then systematic theology does not really have fundamental elements and categories.

XI Unity and Diversity

We may find that Christians throughout history and in various cultures have common connections—a historical connection with previous Christian groups and even back to ancient Israel, Jesus Christ as a person of ultimate significance, the common use of the Bible (in translation), and the common use of bread, wine and water in special

ways.³⁸ These connections exist even when the theology embedded with each element and the practices associated with it may be so different as to often be mutually unrecognizable.

The cultural differences do not need to be immense to produce practices that are unrecognizable as Christian to some believers. For example, at the funeral of the father of one of our Ibibio students, each family member and important visitor threw a handful of dirt on the coffin before the gravediggers filled the grave. This practice is not followed in the neighbouring Annang ethnic group, even though only about twenty miles separated the two groups who share the same language and church denomination. An Annang faculty member who did not toss in a handful of dirt told me privately afterwards that he had never seen this done before and that it must be a pagan practice. If even two such closely related groups could have such different attitudes to a minor variation in funeral rites, how would western evangelicals today react to Irish monks of the 600s reciting psalms while standing in ice-cold water up to their necks? Yet many orthodox but different Christian beliefs and practices exist around the world today.³⁹

If the Bible is God’s revelation to man, and if theology is man’s effort to understand and apply the Bible to himself in his particular situation, then it seems better to regard the Bible as the

35 Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 51-53.

36 Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 40.

37 Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 42.

38 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 6-7.

39 See Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 3-7.

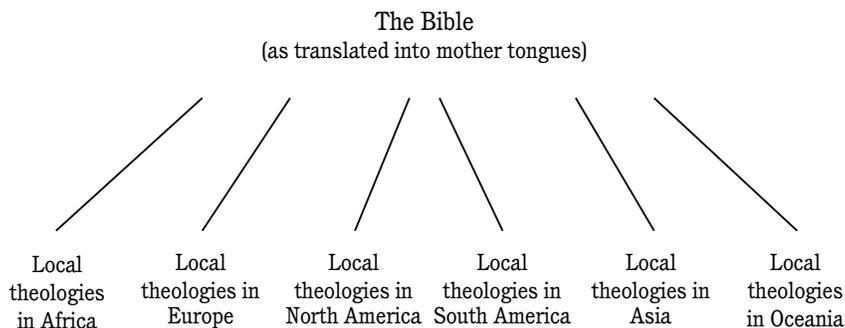


Figure 2

standard that judges all theologies, whether they are developed in Africa or Europe and North America or anywhere else. Figure 2 attempts to illustrate this relationship in a very simple way.

Particular Christian traditions or denominations or mission boards may also be involved in the construction of local theologies alongside or under indigenous believers, but in the end it will be those groups of indigenous believers who read their Bibles in their mother tongues who will decide on the structure and content of their own theologies as they grapple with their own particular issues in their own cultures and situations.⁴⁰ Walls states that 'Theology already existing may help to clarify the issues, but it does not have the resources to make the final decision. It was shaped for other purposes, under the conditions of another time and place'.⁴¹

This type of theology will not arise solely or even primarily from Africa's many academic theologians. Here I make a distinction between academic theology in Africa and what might be called 'vernacular' or 'popular theology'.⁴² Academic theology results in published books and journals while vernacular theology is the theology that ordinary church members live by. It is not limited to what their denominational statement of faith contains and much of it remains oral or even unstated.⁴³

There is a large and continually growing body of African academic theology in print today with both African and non-African writers contributing. But these are most often the author's

⁴⁰ Gichure, *Contextual Theology*, pp. 143-175, writing from within Roman Catholicism, carves out a place for local theologies within that system of authority and doctrine.

⁴¹ Andrew Walls, 'Forward' in Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, xv.

⁴² The term 'vernacular theology' comes from William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 16 ff.

⁴³ Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology*, 31. See G.O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 1993) for an example of an academic interacting with ordinary church members.

scholarly treatment of African theological themes. Many of these themes also reflect pastoral issues, while others examine a traditional Christian theological category from an African perspective.⁴⁴ Even a combined literature and field research study, such as Diane Stinton's fine work on Christology,⁴⁵ cannot cover the popular ideas of Christology among all segments of the Christian population. Her extensive interviews do not cover rural farmers for example. But it is among such people that much of vernacular Christology resides.

How can pastors help their members become more Christ-like in their relationships with one another if their images of Christ are restricted to Jesus as personal saviour from sin?⁴⁶ How can a Jesus who was unmarried and without male heirs, who was poor and at odds with the religious authorities, who died a criminal's death at a young age and was buried in a borrowed grave far from home, who in other words failed to achieve anything in traditional African terms—how can he be a model for Africans today? Is it any wonder that the lives of many ordinary church members do not display as much Christ-likeness as their pastors would

like? Where and how should the truth about Jesus be applied in the lives of Christians in Africa?

Field research in vernacular theology can reveal to diploma students and their teachers the African farmers' answers to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say I am?' (Mt. 15:16), to the question of whether or not women should wear trousers (at all or in church), to the question of women in leadership and to the myriad other questions that African Christians are asking in the rural areas.

Just because the two latter questions seem to be largely settled in Nairobi and some other urban centres does not mean that rural regions have settled them. In fact, some people from urban centres who visit their home villages often create tensions over these and other issues as they try to introduce new practices from the city into the village church. There are plenty of pastoral issues in both urban and rural areas of Africa to keep theologians busy for many years to come.

XII Conclusion

This suggestion to contextualize the structure of theology in Africa arose out of real life situations in the church. It advocates an issues-oriented approach to structuring and teaching African theology, combined with field research on chosen issues. The issues would change from college to college and from time to time as culture changes, but would focus on issues relating to relationships, not concepts divorced from life's issues. This echoes the approach used by the New Testament writers and allows time for an African 'systematic theology' to arise.

44 See West and Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa*, for examples of both approaches in regard to the Bible.

45 Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2004).

46 For an example of a limited Christology see, John M. Waliggo, 'African Christology In A Situation Of Suffering' in Robert J. Schreiter, ed, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), 175-176 where the author notes that Catholic theology students often saw Jesus as irrelevant.

David Yonggi Cho's Theology Of Blessing: Basis, Legitimacy, and Limitations

Wonsuk Ma

KEYWORDS: *Pentecostalism, prosperity gospel/theology of blessing, Korea, Spirit of God, context*

I. Introduction¹

In the first half of the twentieth century, Pentecostalism was often called by some a 'tongue-speaking movement'. Hot debates on the nature and validity of the modern phenomenon of tongue-speaking produced some extreme condemnations, such as tongues being identified as the 'last

vomit of Satan'.² Then came the popularization of Pentecostal messages in the second half of the last century, thanks to the genius entrepreneurial spirit of televangelists of North America. However, this is no longer just a North American scene, as TV channels on a Sunday morning in Lusaka, Zambia are full of Christian messages, including Pentecostal ones for sure. The revolutionary internet availability will also accelerate the process of the religious popularization of Pentecostal messages. In most Pentecostal-charismatic media programs, the most popular topic is healing and material blessing, thus, the birth of the 'prosperity gospel'.

¹ The current version is a substantial revision and expansion of Wonsuk Ma, 'David Yonggi Cho's Theology of Blessing: A new theological base and direction', in *Dr. Yonggi Cho's Ministry and Theology: A Commemorative Collection for the 50th Anniversary of Dr. Yonggi Cho's Ministry*, 2 vols., ed. Young San Theological Institute (Gunpo, Korea: Hansei University Logos, 2008), I:179-200

² G. Campbell Morgan's infamous statement, quoted in many publications, e.g., Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 146.

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Who coined this exact expression is not clear, and the motivation may not have been affirmative but rather more critical in nature. Many agree, however, that the birth of the prosperity gospel is often attributed to Kenneth Hagin who rose as an important televangelist in the 1970s.³ Sometimes known as the 'health and wealth gospel', this North American twist of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity has spread far and wide throughout the world. Perhaps because of a lack of proper terminology, any stream of Christianity which has a strong emphasis on God's immediate intervention in human life with his provision and care is often thrown into this category, especially those found in many developing countries, as well as the nine-million strong El Shaddai Catholic Charismatic group in the Philippines, Universal Church of the Reign of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus) in many urban centres of Brazil, countless African forms of indigenous Pentecostal groups, and so on.

The aim of this study is not to trace its historical development, but to argue that 'across-the-border suspicion' against many look-alike 'prosperity' phenomena, particularly in non-western settings, may require a close examination of their motivation, context, orientation, and theological grounding. Although requiring caution, the preaching of God's blessing, nonetheless, is a part of the Christian faith. The

study also suggests the parameters within which the legitimacy of such preaching is established. This will also challenge theological minds to exercise more nuance in applying a western paradigm to externally similar phenomena found in non-western settings. To approach the matter with a neutral mind, I am using the term 'theology of blessing' instead of the 'prosperity gospel'.

To illustrate the argument, I have chosen David Yonggi Cho as an example. Cho is the founder and senior pastor of the Yoido Full Gospel Church (YFGC), the single largest congregation, until his retirement from the church leadership in 2008. Cho has often been generally known for advocating the prosperity gospel. My choice of Cho was also motivated by the availability of literature, often made popular by him, and an increasing number of academic reflections on him. He will be briefly introduced before the contextual and biblical discussions.

Two lenses will be used to establish its legitimacy with limitation: context and theology. The former will use the socio-cultural context in which Cho has developed his theology through his pastoral years. More specifically the cultural context will focus on widespread Korean religiosity and expectations, and the social context on that of poverty. The theological reflection is specifically to situate Cho's theology of blessing within the Pentecostal set of beliefs, with its theological basis and goals.

For the theological reflection, there are various perspectives that would produce fruitful research on this particular theology. For the present study, however, two biblical pneumatic tradi-

³ See for example Kenneth E. Hagin, *Redeemed from Poverty, Sickness, and Spiritual Death* (Tulsa, OK: Faith Library Publications, 1973).

tions, represented by two exemplary passages, are used to illustrate the point. Thus, this study has two aims: first, to establish a legitimate locus for his theology of blessing as a Pentecostal theology, and second, to provide a Pentecostal theological goal for the theology of blessing. That is, the study attempts to suggest a new biblical basis or 'beginning', and the goal or 'end' of this unique theology. It will be proper, therefore, to approach this section with a critical and analytical mind.

The writer bases his study of Cho's theology of blessing on his selected publications in English. Considering his countless sermons and lectures delivered in the past fifty years of his ministry, and the long list of printed material in Korean, the English publications account for only a fraction of his vast resources. It is also possible that this collection of selected material in English may not fairly represent the vast array of his thoughts. The recent publication of a massive series of studies to commemorate his fifty-year ministry has been a welcome addition to the growing scholarly studies on Cho.⁴ This choice was made intentionally as the reflection is primarily intended for international readership; my own experiences and observations of the church and Cho are used only as a secondary resource. A reasonable degree of contact with various leadership of the YFGC over an extended period has also been useful.

⁴ At least 29 studies are included in the two English volumes of *Dr. Yonggi Cho's Ministry and Theology: A Commemorative Collection for the 50th Anniversary of Dr. Yonggi Cho's Ministry*.

II David Yonggi Cho and His Theology of Blessing

1 A Brief History

Since the 1960s, the Korean church has been hailed as a sterling success of modern missionary work. Statistics attest to this claim easily. It is now claimed that a quarter of Southern Koreans are Christians, and the Korean church is the second largest missionary-sending entity, only after the United States. It is indisputably affirmed that the phenomenal growth of the Yoido Full Gospel Church, founded by David Yonggi Cho, is not only an epitome of, but the leading powerhouse for, Korean church growth.

A quick glance at the half-century history of the YFGC confirms the notion. The church began with a handful of members in 1958, in the outskirts of Seoul among the poor and underprivileged social classes in post-Korean War rubbles. When the church moved to downtown Seoul in 1962, it grew to 10,000. In 1972 when the church finally moved to Yoido Island (a Korean-War era military airfield) in the Han River of Seoul, not many believed that anyone would inhabit the island. But now Yoido is the mass media and financial centre of the nation, appropriately called the Wall Street of Korea. In the Yoido era, the church continually grew, and with 700,000 members in 1992, and currently 750,000, it is claimed to be the largest single congregation in the world.⁵

⁵ For a useful history of the church, see 'The Tent Church: 1958-1961, the Early Years—

Many would agree that the church owes Cho for much of its phenomenal growth. His role has been studied in various aspects, including his leadership style, administrative skills, vision, prayer, cell-system, excellent communication skills and the like. However, many believe that his theology, or more specifically the 'theology of blessing', has been the bedrock of his message and ministry, fuelling the growth of the church and the far-reaching impact of the ministry beyond the immediate confines of the YFGC.

2 Theology of Blessing

It is in order to briefly summarize Cho's theology of blessing. First of all, he developed the 'three-fold salvation' based on 3 John 2: 'Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul' (NRSV). This modified early Christian greeting from a Roman practice provides a scriptural basis for Cho's comprehensive view of salvation.⁶ Salvation, according to him, encompasses spiritual, circumstantial, and physical dimensions of Christian life. His theology of blessing is based on this comprehensive salvation of God

in our life.

It becomes instantly clear, therefore, that his theology of blessing is soteriologically motivated (that is, salvation) via Christological process (that is, through the atoning work of Christ). Consequently, there has been little pneumatological exploration. Thus, in a theologically strict sense, theology of blessing cannot be categorized fully as a Pentecostal theological theme. It is also true that this holistic view, against the more spiritually oriented view of salvation among traditional Christianity, has on the one hand almost revolutionized Korean Christian beliefs, while on the other hand, it has posed the challenge of properly balancing the three components. The theological framework of Cho's theology of blessing has been developed in the 'five-fold gospel'.⁷

a) Pentecostal 'Five' (or 'Four')

Pentecostals are familiar with the traditional four- or five-fold Gospels, perhaps based on A. B. Simpson's original 'Four-fold Gospel': Jesus as Saviour, Healer, Baptizer, and Coming King.⁸ Early Pentecostals, while using the same terminology as the Christian and Missionary Alliance of Simpson, reinterpreted the 'Baptizer' as Spirit-baptism, while adding the 'Sanctifier',

the Tent Church' (<http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/History.htm>, 2007), 'The Church at Seo-DaeMun: 1962-1972—the Church at Seo-DaeMun' (<http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/History2.htm>, 2007) and 'The Church at Yoido: The Growing Church' (<http://english.fgtv.com/yoido/History.htm3>, 2007), accessed on Jan 21, 2008.

⁶ Because of its customary use among early Christians, some NT theologians have questioned the validity of using such passages in developing a theological system.

⁷ One of a few books in English on the topic is *Salvation, Health and Prosperity: Our Three-fold Blessings in Christ* (Altamonte Springs, FL: Creation House, 1987).

⁸ A. B. Simpson, *The Fourfold Gospel: Albert B. Simpson's Concept of the Complete Provision of Christ for Every Need of the Believer—Spirit, Soul and Body*, (updated version) (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1984).

making it five-fold. Non-Wesleyan Pentecostals after the 1910s maintained the four-fold structure with the reinterpreted notion of the 'Baptizer'.

This short background is important for two reasons. First, since the 'Five-fold' language is almost a technical theological language for Pentecostals, Cho's five-fold theology can easily be misinterpreted as the Holiness Pentecostal system, if one fails to check the content of the 'five'.

Additionally, a comparison between Cho's five and the Pentecostal four or five (see the chart below)⁹ would immediately reveal several important features of his theological framework.

1) Like traditional Pentecostals, his theology is unmistakably Christo-centric. This is noteworthy as sometimes he has been criticized by non-Pentecostal Christianity in Korea as being Spirit-centric, minimizing the work of Christ for salvation.

2) His five-fold theology aligns closely with the 'Pentecostal Four' that is the theology of the Assemblies of God, with which he and his church have been affiliated. The 'Blesser' component has been added to the 'Pentecostal Four.'

3) The addition of the fifth has been contextually motivated as Cho applied the traditional Pentecostal theology to the unique socio-cultural context of Korea.¹⁰

Thus, his theology of blessing can be properly explained by, and appreciated from, this understanding. This has critical importance as popular writers readily label him as 'shamanistic.'¹¹

Pentecostal Five	Pentecostal Four	Cho's Five
Jesus as Saviour		
Healer		
Sanctifier		Blesser
(Spirit) Baptizer		
Coming King		

b) Theology of Blessing and the 'Prosperity Gospel'

Cho's emphasis on blessing has often been interpreted within the developmental framework of Pentecostalism. Unlike classical Pentecostals, Charismatics, primarily coming from the mid-

Theology' (69-93) and Allan Anderson, 'The Contextual Pentecostal Theology of David Yonggi Cho' (133-59), in *David Yonggi Cho: A Close Look at His Theology and Ministry*, eds. Wonsuk Ma, et al. (Baguio, Philippines: APTS Press, 2004) and Wonsuk Ma, 'Asian (Classical) Pentecostalism: Theology in Context', in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, eds. Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2005), 59-91.

¹¹ E.g., Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995), and his dialogue with Korean theologians in the 5th International Theological Seminar.

⁹ The titles such as 'Pentecostal (Five)' and 'Cho's Five' is not to indicate that Cho's is not Pentecostal, but it is only for comparative convenience.

¹⁰ This point has been adequately argued by several theologians recently. Hwa Yung, 'Missiological Challenge of David Yonggi Cho's

dle class, mainline Christianity in North America and later Europe in the 1960s, had successfully 'married' the Pentecostal message with the message of prosperity. It is not difficult to understand, for example, how the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship became a vanguard of the new Pentecostal generation, called the Charismatic movement.¹² Coupled with the healing message, this variety created a powerful popular religion primarily through televangelists such as Oral Roberts. Their strong emphasis on healing and material prosperity led to the birth of the 'health and wealth' theology, 'prosperity gospel', faith movement and 'kingdom now' theology.

It is important to recognize that this 'Pentecostal version 2.0' is clearly a child of Pentecostal theology. In spite of their new emphasis on healing and blessing, the classical Pentecostals had championed the instantaneous aspect of God's intervention whether that is Spirit-baptism or healing. Also, expecting God's miracles to meet various human needs is attested to, for example, in the testimonies of early Pentecostal missionaries. What is being criticized about this theology is its theological intent—whether 'health and wealth' is self-serving or kingdom-serving.

Understandably, Cho's theology of blessing has been severely criticized from within and without. It may be

worthwhile to note that some criticism from within appears to have come partially from an apprehension that such emphasis on everyday matters may pull Christianity as a 'high religion' down toward more popular but 'lower' religious domains often marked by Shamanistic characteristics. For this reason, especially in light of popular writings of the west,¹³ some recent publications are significant. They have aptly argued the legitimacy and validity of Cho's theology as a creative contextual application of Pentecostal tradition.¹⁴ However, at this point, what is at the core is the theological intent of such theology: whether it is 'self-serving' or 'kingdom-serving' as observed above for the Charismatic movement.

III Context: Interpretive Tool for Theology of Blessing

The first point of legitimacy for the theology of blessing is found in its situatedness, that is its socio-cultural context in which Christianity exists, operates, and attempts to engage with. In Cox's words, a new religion needs to meet two basic conditions in order for it to be successful in the Korean environment: first, to continue 'at least some elements of the traditional cultures and religion'; and second, to 'help people cope with both the rampant urbanization and the wrenching demands of new economic and political

¹² For example, J. R. Zeigler, 'Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International', *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess, et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 653-54.

¹³ For a recent one, see David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (London: Blackwell, 2001).

¹⁴ See Note 10 above.

realities'.¹⁵ In Cho's case, it is the economic challenge which his parishioners face each day, and their religious orientation which influences their expectation in a new-found Christianity.

1 Social Context: Struggle for Survival

The most revealing windows to the world in which Cho began his pastoral ministry are his own accounts. First, he describes his pioneering church as follows: The year 1958, when the church was first opened, was five years after the devastating Korean War concluded with a truce agreement.

Although a tent church was erected, nowhere did we see a sign of hope for success: the people of Daejo-dong [the area where Cho began his church] whose brightest hope was to pass a day with a proper meal; the church right by a public cemetery on the top of a hill;¹⁶ the church whose roof was a torn U.S. army tent....¹⁷

The following account is more revealing of the dire social circumstance, and Cho's message of hope to counter the wide-spread poverty, both material and mental.

One day, a crippled shoeshine boy

came to our tent church. He was told that he could be healed in this church.... It is already October, and cold wind painfully blew, rain drops were as cold as ice, and the straw mats on the church floor were already frozen. Yes, many filled this tent church in worship. Among them, I saw the boy. In spite of shivering cold, I preached a message of hope with all my heart from the pulpit. 'God is good, and he is our father. Even though our life struggles today, if we welcome Jesus into our lives, and stand firm in faith, he will bless and transform our soul, body and our life. Have hope in Jesus. Hope that the sick will be healed, and the poor have plenty.' After the service, the boy requested a prayer for healing. 'Pastor, I want to walk. Please help me.'... I began to pray... But there was no change. I prayed again.... I held his hands, and shouted, 'In the name of Jesus Christ, straighten your legs!' 'In the name of Jesus Christ, rise up, rise up!' Soon the whole church erupted in a roar. The boy began to rise and walk! The whole church was praising the Lord with joy and excitement.¹⁸

It is in such a desperate social situation that the message of hope and blessing finds its rightful place. In today's world where one billion people live in absolute poverty, that is, with less than \$1 per day, the God, who created each life and gave his own Son so

15 Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 220.

16 Koreans build cemeteries as far from residential areas as possible, as cemeteries represent a world of the dead. This note is mine.

17 David Yonggi Cho, *Forty-five Years of Ministry of Hope: Small Group Miracle* [in Korean] (Seoul: Institute for Church Growth, 2004), 19.

18 Cho, *Forty-five Years of Ministry of Hope*, 37-38.

that we may have blessed eternal life, is expected to be mindful of the daily struggle of the masses. Most of such under-developed and developing areas are in the non-western world, where worldviews tend to be holistic. The demarcation between the material and spiritual realms in such places is not as clear as in the western world.

Christianity cannot simply be restricted to religious matters such as sin, forgiveness, eternal life, etc, while physical and material concerns are assigned to different mission programs such as development, education, hospitals, etc. Only after a life can survive physically, will the soul have a chance to learn of spiritual matters. In such a social setting, the primacy of physical and material dimensions of life, therefore, is more pronounced than the spiritual aspects of Christian mission. However, it is critical to remember that the context does not provide a complete or permanent basis for legitimacy.

2 Religiosity

Related to Cho's engagement within the Korean social context is the interaction between his theology and Korean traditional religiosity. At the core of Korean religiosity is Shamanism, a Northeast Asian version of animism with the significant role of ancestor spirits. It is interesting to note that Cho has been constantly accused of incorporating shamanistic elements into Christianity. For non-Korean scholars, the alleged incorporation of Shamanistic or indigenous spirituality or symbolism has been viewed as a creative contextualization of Christianity in the Korean cultural-religious con-

text.¹⁹ However, the crux of criticism from within has been on the emphasis of blessing.

Christian orientation with the element of blessing highlighted had been not known in Korean until the explosive spread of Pentecostal worship and messages in the 1970s and afterwards. Korean Christianity, through its hard times under the Japanese colonial period and the following Korean War, had developed an extremely other-worldly outlook. Even in the 1970s, the Book of Revelation was a popular book for annual revival weeks of local congregations. In this environment, Cho's message of God's goodness for the here and now in concrete terms raised a host of criticisms. His theology was often branded as *Gibok Shinang* [faith that seeks or prays for blessing].²⁰ For this reason, his theology was accused of being Shamanistic.

Cho's approach has been particularly relevant to two particular aspects of indigenous religiosity—the general perception of spiritual beings and their perceived ability to harm or bless. First, Cho has consistently emphasized

¹⁹ Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 219-220; Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 100, n. 2. Hollenweger's appreciation for active 'syncretism' is found in Walter J. Hollenweger, 'Syncretism and Capitalism', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 2:1 (1999), 47-61.

²⁰ For a useful study on *Gibok Shinang*, see Sebastian C.H. Kim, 'The Problem of Poverty in Post-War Korean Christianity: *Gibock Sinang* or *Minjung* Theology?' *Transformation* 24:1 (Jan 2007), 43-50.

the goodness of God.²¹ This was significant in the context where the spiritual beings are not always benevolent—in fact, many rituals are performed either to appease offended spirits or to neutralize curses.

Second, Cho paid attention to the most relevant role of traditional religions: meeting the daily needs of worshippers. Most folk religious beliefs, especially in the non-western world, take the pursuit of blessing seriously. Blessing, being defined as provision, protection and guidance, is the primary reason for religious devotion, whether it is to gods, spirits or deceased ancestor spirits. As Christianity takes root in such a religious soil, people bring with them their former religious framework and expectations and apply them to Christianity as their new faith.²² Without this ‘functional substitution’, the new religion will remain irrelevant to everyday living. This often causes them to resort to old religious beliefs to find answers to daily needs, while

Christianity meets other religious needs such as forgiveness and salvation. This constitutes what is called ‘split-level Christianity’. A Korean attempt to bring this existential and cultural need to Christianity has been Cho’s theology of blessing.

IV Two Biblical Pneumatic Traditions: Interpretive Tool for Theology of Blessing II

The Old Testament provides rich pneumatic traditions. However, as part of the general ignorance of the Old Testament among Evangelicals, many critical elements of the Spirit in the OT have been partially or completely undiscovered by Pentecostals today.²³ This seeming Pentecostal ignorance prevailing among western Christians has been ‘propagated’ throughout the whole world along with their missionary endeavours.

As discussed in various places,²⁴ these traditions can be categorized into two: charismatic and non-charismatic. The former includes the leadership and prophetic spirit traditions, while the latter may include creation tradition, the Spirit as God’s agent or instrument, the Spirit as an extension of God’s being, and the Wisdom tradition. On the other hand, in the New Testa-

21 Four important studies are included in *Dr. Yonggi Cho’s Ministry and Theology: A Commemorative Collection for the 50th Anniversary of Dr. Yonggi Cho’s Ministry*, vol. 1: Rodrigo D. Tano, ‘Dr. Yonggi Cho’s Theology of a GOOD GOD’ (17-30); Donald W. Dayton, ‘The “Good God” and the “Theology of Blessing” in the Thought of David Yonggi Cho’ (31-56); Young Hoon Lee, ‘Influence of Dr. Cho’s “God is so good-faith” in the Korean Churches’ (57-79); Yeol Soo Eim, ‘The Influence of Dr. Cho’s Goodness of God Theology upon His Ministry’ (81-103).

22 For example, see Julie C. Ma and Wonsuk Ma, *Mission in the Spirit: Towards a Pentecostal/Charismatic Missiology* (Oxford: Regnum, 2010), 99-114 for Asian religious world-views.

23 This does not imply any lack of studies in the area. For example, a Pentecostal scholar published a well studied work, Wilf Hilderbrandt, *An Old Testament Theology of the Spirit of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

24 For a brief discussion, see Wonsuk Ma, *Until the Spirit Comes: The Spirit of God in the Book of Isaiah*, JSOTS (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 29-32.

ment, various writers further develop only a selected Old Testament tradition or two.

The current discussion has chosen two traditions: leadership and creation-Spirit traditions, the most important traditions for the charismatic and non-charismatic Spirit traditions respectively. Also one is chosen from the Old Testament, and the other from the New. The OT passage will, in addition to establishing its theological legitimacy, demonstrate how the theology of blessing can be developed as a significant theme for Pentecostal theology especially in Asia. The NT passage will help us to view God's blessing as the empowerment of the Spirit for witnessing, thus setting a new theological purpose, so that we can prevent a destructive slip into the trap of popular and self-serving prosperity gospel.

1 Creation-Spirit Tradition

The creation-Spirit tradition has been particularly ignored by Pentecostals for a variety of reasons. This tradition begins with the involvement of the Spirit in creation itself (e.g., Gen. 1:2), and more specifically in the life-giving and sustaining role of the Spirit (e.g., Job 33:4, cf. Gen. 2). However, due to the fall of humanity, to begin with, and the continuing failure of Israel as God's people, the total destruction and judgment was pronounced by many prophets (e.g., Hosea). However, God's last word for his people is never judgment, but restoration. In these eschatological promises, the creation-Spirit tradition takes a radical change and expansion. Ezekiel 37 records a vision of dry bones. The S/spirit brings life to

them and the dry bones (i.e., exiled Israel) are to turn into a great army of God. In this old life-giving role of the Spirit, the scope is suddenly expanded to include personal and community restoration. In addition, the restoration encompasses the physical and material as well as the emotional, national and spiritual aspects. The present passage is an excellent example of the wide range of the eschatological promise of restoration for God's people.

Isaiah 32:15-18

¹⁵Until the spirit from above is poured upon us and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

¹⁶Then justice will dwell in the wilderness and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.

¹⁷And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust for ever

¹⁸My people will abide in a peaceful pasture in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting place.

The passage of blessing through the coming of the Spirit begins and ends with the notion of 'water',²⁵ clearly signifying the life-giving and restoring function of the Spirit. It is the coming of the Spirit that ushers in the time of restoration after the long time of judg-

²⁵ Thus, the same concept envelops the passage, providing an unmistakable emphasis. This is called *inclusio*.

ment (34:9-14). Unlike the previous incidents where only a handful of chosen leaders in Israel's history enjoyed the experience, this time the Spirit will be given to everyone in the community in great abundance as if heaven's flood gate has been opened. This divine force is to regenerate the dead and dry national life (e.g., Ezek. 37) and individual lives in the community. Since the Spirit is the only life-giver, the same Spirit will bestow new life to lifeless individuals, communities and nations.

The immediate consequence will be the renewal of nature in fertility. Fruitfulness should not be quickly spiritualized, but applied first to the real agricultural dimension. The age of salvation is a time of fruitfulness in the material and physical sense. This physical or material fruitfulness is immediately accompanied by, or alternatively results in, a moral transformation: justice and righteousness (v. 16, cf. Ps. 72; Isa. 11.1-9).²⁶ This is further developed into security, rest and shalom (vs. 17-18). One might say that the consequence of the Spirit's coming is material, physical, emotional, ethical, social, national and even spiritual transformation and restoration. This is only one of a few passages in the Old Testament where the coming of the Spirit has an explicit implication for

physical and material prosperity and blessing, among others.²⁷

a) Reflection

It is true that the role of the Spirit in this passage is found in the context of restoration or soteriological promise. Cho has rightly argued that our salvation includes the removal of curses of sin.²⁸ Once the curse is removed, according to Cho, 'blessings will come to every area of our lives. The cursed land will turn into good land flowing with milk and honey and God's blessings. Every area of our lives will be redeemed to live in newness of life.'²⁹ He also makes clear that the Holy Spirit plays a critical role in this process.³⁰ And yet, a direct role of the Holy Spirit in making our lives whole is to be developed, as restoration and blessing has not been explored as a pneumatological theme in Cho's theology of blessings.

This passage, as an example of the Spirit tradition in creation, suggests a vast array of pneumatological significance. The first is the critical role of the members of the community. The Spirit is not poured upon nature, but upon 'us', the members of the desperate community who long for the new era. Only when the Spirit is poured upon them, the awaited new era breaks in. The sec-

²⁶ The construct singular form of מַעֲשֵׂה has the customary meaning of 'work' but here more precisely 'effect of working'. (I. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962). 391), 'according to ancient Hebrew thought, moral perfection is always accompanied by שְׁלוֹמִים in the material as well as the spiritual sense'.

²⁷ Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39: A Commentary*, trans. John Sturdy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 334.

²⁸ E.g., David Yonggi Cho, *Salvation, Health and Prosperity: Our Threefold Blessings in Christ* (Altamonte Springs, FL Creation House, 1987), 16.

²⁹ Cho, *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, 69.

³⁰ Cho, *Salvation, Health and Prosperity*, 54.

ond is the holistic scope of the Spirit's impact. It encompasses material, physical, emotional, moral, social and spiritual wholeness. This also ranges from personal to communal.

b) In Relation to Theology of Blessing

Now, what can we glean from this Spirit tradition and the passage as to the further development of Cho's theology of blessing? First of all, this passage provides an important and solid pneumatological ground for material prosperity and physical wholeness. It is the Spirit that brings agricultural bounty through the transformation of the land. In the light of the heavy soteriological basis for Cho's theology of blessing, the creation-Spirit tradition provides a valid and fruitful new theological ground for a balanced theological foundation. In this way, his theology of blessing becomes a legitimate part of Pentecostal theology with a solid pneumatic biblical basis. Likewise, the healing tradition in Pentecostal theology, traditionally rooted in the Christological framework, can be expanded to the pneumatological sphere, by applying the restorative dimension of the creation Spirit tradition.

Second, the moral and ethical dimension of the work of the Spirit cannot be missed in this passage. Montague observed that this consequence is the first clear and positive association of the Spirit of God with the new ethical life that is part of the coming salvation.³¹ And the Spirit of God inau-

gurates this new era of restoration.

One weakness of Cho's theology of blessing, often treated as a variation of the prosperity gospel, is the seeming ambiguity of its theological goal or intent. That is, a clear theological direction has not been emphasized to respond to the question, 'What is blessing for?' 'Is the Christian concept of blessing any different from, let's say, the Shamanistic or secular idea?' There is no doubt that biblical guidelines have been expressed through various avenues. However, still lacking is a definite theological guidance for the stewardship of God's blessing, which the next Spirit tradition attempts to address.

One implication of this weakness is the area of moral consciousness of justice and righteousness. Often this area has been marked for liberal Christian activists because Korean Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity was practically indifferent to the political oppression of the military government in the 1970s and 80s, often to support its commitment to national security against the alleged communist threat and in its drive for economic development. Ironically, this was the period when Korean Christianity achieved the most impressive church growth.

The realization of God's rule in justice and righteousness comes through the presence of God's Spirit among his people.³² That justice and righteousness follow physical and material well-being may suggest that God brings

³¹ George T. Montague, *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 40.

³² Isa. 11:1ff. also shows that the presence of God's Spirit upon his chosen leader results in the realization of justice and righteousness in society. It is also noted that this promise is for the future.

material affluence so that his people would uphold justice and righteousness, especially for the sake of the powerless. It is often the 'powerful' who violate justice and righteousness. The passage, thus, calls for a strong ethical orientation and responsibility in regard to the theology of blessing.

Third, the social dimension, related to the above, cannot be ignored. First of all, the coming of the Spirit is 'upon us', thus, unmistakably pointing to its social and communal context. Justice, righteousness, peace, security, and trust as the result of the Spirit's presence are also communal in context. This strongly opposes the highly individualized notion of the modern theology of blessing. One's personal affluence does not mean much, unless it is understood in the context of a community. For this reason, it is encouraging to see an increasing discussion on the Pentecostal notion of social service.³³

For several decades, YFGC has shown its leadership in Christian service to society. Several among them stand out: the establishment of the Elim Welfare Town, a social institution for caring and training, the courageous publication of a daily newspaper, *Kookmin Daily*, a program to help children with heart disease to receive badly

needed heart surgery, and recently a humanitarian and relief NGO called 'Good People'. These epitomize their continuing efforts to 'serve' and 'lead' the society. However, given the potential of Korean Christianity and the YFGC in particular, there seem to be many more areas where the church should serve and lead.

Here is an example. Several years ago during a national election, an alliance of civic groups decided to investigate each candidate for their ethical record to determine their eligibility for the national assembly. They posted publicly a list of the ineligible and urged the voters to exclude them from their consideration. As a result, many on the list were not elected. However, soon after the election, the leader of the civic alliance was charged for his moral failure. This made us wonder why the powerful Korean Christianity had never done something similar in the past. What is more troubling is that this did not challenge Christians to assume their social role to uphold moral standards.

Fourth, the Spirit's potential for peace and unity adds an important element to the theology of blessing. The ultimate goal of the Spirit's coming in this tradition is for God's people to dwell in security and enjoy God's restoration, thus, completing the idea of shalom. This is particularly relevant to Korea's immediate concern for national reunification. The last half century has witnessed continuous political and military conflicts between the two Koreas. Christians have found themselves right in the middle of this conflict in two important areas.

First, they are primarily victims of the conflict, and well remember how

33 For instance, the entire issue of academic journal *Transformation* 16:2 (1999) was dedicated to the theme, 'A Pentecostal approach to evangelization and social concern' with 'Brussels' Statement on Evangelization and Social Concern' (41-43). Also see the recently published study of what is called 'Progressive Pentecostal churches' throughout the world, Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

communist soldiers conspicuously burned and destroyed churches, and captured, tortured, killed, or took Christians to the north. This reminds us of similar experiences during the Japanese regime and also of the widespread persecution of Christians world-wide today. Second, Christians were in the forefront in upholding national security. Bible school students of the Yongmoon Prayer Mountain attempted more than once to march to the north across the heavily fortified demilitarized zone for national reunification. The Yongmoon Prayer Mountain also started a 24-hour prayer altar for national security, and many prayer mountains and churches followed this and began similar programs. While the nation is preparing for the eventual reunification, Pentecostal churches including the YFGC, should provide a holistic pneumatological paradigm for national unity and the post-reunification period.

Equally relevant is the Spirit's role in Christian unity. An institutional attempt for church unity through the World Council of Churches (WCC) has shown the importance of church unity in Christian witness. It has, however, also shown how challenging, if not impossible altogether, the task would be, without letting God's Spirit take full control and God's people faithfully obeying the Spirit's call. Although again failed by human ignorance, the Pentecostal movement, through the Azusa Street mission, demonstrated this ecumenical potential to the world.³⁴ Equally powerful were some

ecumenical Charismatic celebrations including mainline Protestants and Catholics together. Although less rooted in material blessing, the Spirit's potential for peace and unity urges Christians, particularly Pentecostals whose 'upward mobility' has given them a better forum to influence the society, to exercise their unique contributions. For this reason, even in a society where Christianity is an insignificant minority, Christians should uphold the public nature of religions including Christianity.

Fifth, although rather implicit, the holistic scope of the Spirit's work calls his people to faithful stewardship of God's creation.³⁵ The passage suggests that the whole chain of transformation and restoration begins with nature: the transformation of the land. The paradise motive further enhances this point: the picture of an ideal community of peace is not a concrete jungle where high technology and human-made skyscrapers overwhelm, but a setting where God's creation serves God and his people while nature is not exploited but properly cared for. If Pentecostals are people of God's Spirit, then God's creation shaped and vitalized by the Spirit should be champions of this stewardship. This pneumatic theology of creation deserves careful attention from Pentecostal academia and believers.

What has been laid out here is not an exhaustive list of potential areas

³⁴ For example, Cecil M. Jr. Robeck, 'Pentecostals and the Apostolic Faith: Implications for Ecumenism', *Pneuma: The Journal of the*

Society for Pentecostal Studies 9:1 (Spring, 1987), 61-84.

³⁵ Wonsuk Ma, 'The Spirit of God in Creation: Lessons for Christian Mission', *Transformation* 24:3 & 4 (July & Oct. 2007), 222-30.

where a theology of blessing can expand its scope of formulation. These areas can strengthen some weak areas of the theology of blessing as it now stands. Also, this discussion clearly challenges this theology to explore several fruitful areas and expand the limits of the theology of blessing for its maturity.

2 Leadership-Spirit Tradition

This charismatic tradition is based on several popular OT figures including four judges, Saul, and David. In the record of their experiences with God's Spirit, several patterns emerge, with one important feature being the empowering effect. Gideon was equipped with military wisdom, strategy and executive ability (Judg. 6), while Samson experienced superhuman physical prowess every time the Spirit came mightily upon him (Judg. 14; 15). Saul was enraged at the barbaric demand of the Ammonites when the Spirit came upon him powerfully (1 Sam. 11); as a result, he mobilized a successful inter-tribal contingent army and destroyed the enemy's threat, liberating God's people. In David's case, no explicit purpose is given except the permanency of the Spirit (1 Sam. 16:13), although the ensuing achievements are implicitly attributed to the presence of the Spirit in him.

Another group of passages also refers to the Spirit, but this time for eschatological figures. For example, God introduces his chosen Servant in Isaiah 42. The Spirit of God is upon him and this presence of the Spirit is directly related to his mission: proclaiming justice to the nations, thus indicating the empowering aspect of

the leadership Spirit tradition. What is significant in this passage is the nature of empowerment. It is no longer physical and military, but internal and perhaps ethical in nature. The Servant is to persevere in the face of difficulties and adversaries and to persist to fulfil his mission.

A similar passage is found in Isaiah 11. This ideal Davidic king is to be equipped with the Spirit of the Lord. But the effect is more ethical or even spiritual than political or military, as the 'fear of the Lord' becomes the summary expression of the king's attribute. His rule is to establish justice and righteousness by protecting the rights of the powerless, while judging the oppression of the powerful. The Spirit's empowerment is to bring harmony to the human and animal worlds (Isa. 11:6-9).

Several characteristics found in this Spirit tradition are worth mentioning in relation to the present discussion. First, earlier traditions make it clear that only a few selected individuals experienced the Spirit of God. Only in the last days or eschatological consummation, will the Spirit be poured upon everyone (Joel 2:28; Num. 11). Second, the coming of the Spirit also appeared to be temporary in nature. As seen in Samson's case, for example, every time superhuman prowess was needed, the Spirit of God came upon him (Judg. 14; 15). The third is the unique feature of 'charismatic empowerment'. It implies the entrusted nature of the Spirit's empowerment, and a specific God-given task for the leader (commission).

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when

the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and, to the ends of the earth.

This traditional Pentecostal motto passage has been perhaps the most recited verse in the whole Bible. In this passage, which is often considered to be the master plan for the entire Book of Acts, the immediate connection between the Holy Spirit and empowerment is evident. For our discussion, the whole of Lukan literature and its pneumatology will be within the scope of our investigation. It is well known that Lukan pneumatology has focused on, and further developed, the leadership and prophetic Spirit traditions of the Old Testament, both charismatic Spirit traditions. These are two important features of Lukan theology for Pentecostal missiology.

a) Reflection

Two features characterize the process of God's plan unfolded in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.³⁶ The first is the charismatic orientation of Lukan theology. Luke carefully refers to the two charismatic spirit traditions: the leadership and prophetic spirit traditions. They are borrowed mostly from the Book of Isaiah.³⁷ To Luke, this

charismatic S/spirit is the source of miraculous manifestations of God's power through healing and miracles,³⁸ and also the source of persevering persistence to fulfil the calling. Luke understands that the charismatic empowerment of the Spirit is to enable the disciples to go out in power and perseverance. It was written that Paul and Peter, the key figures in the Book of Acts, ministered through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The second features is the mission focus of Lukan pneumatology. The two books of Luke were written not just to preserve the record of Jesus' life and ministry, but ultimately to convince 'most excellent Theophilus' (Luke 1:3, cf. Acts 1:1) of the Christian faith. Thus, the books were written with a missionary purpose.³⁹ One important observation is the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. Luke concludes his Gospel with a shorter form of the Great Commission, '...repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witness of these things' (Luke 24:47-48). Then he records Christ's command for the disciples not to leave Jerusalem until they 'have been clothed with power from on high' (24:49). Here is a clear connection between the Great Commission and the role of the Holy Spirit.

36 Wonsuk Ma, 'Full Circle Mission: A Possibility of Pentecostal Missiology', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 8:1 (2005), 5-27.

37 Wonsuk Ma, 'The Empowerment of the Spirit of God in Luke-Acts: An Old Testament Perspective', in *The Spirit and Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Russell P. Spittler*, eds. Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 28-40.

38 For a fine study on the name of the 'power', see Manuel A. Bagalawis, 'Power' in Acts 1:8: Effective Witnessing through Signs and Wonders', *Journal of Asian Mission* 3:1 (2001), 1-13.

39 E.g., John Michael Penney, *The Missionary Emphasis of Lukan Pneumatology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), esp. 18-25.

Then the Book of Acts repeats the concluding statement of the Gospel of Luke: '...he [Jesus] ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father' (Acts 1:4). But here, Luke makes an interesting reinterpretation of the popular remark of John the Baptist: 'He [Jesus] will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (and fire)' (Mark 1:8; Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16). In other Gospels, the Holy Spirit (and fire) functions to cleanse people of sins. However, Luke, by placing the same statement right after Acts 1:4, shows how Jesus' baptism in the Holy Spirit acquires an 'empowering' and missional function.

In Acts, this empowering presence of the Spirit is transferred to the disciples. The disciples through the empowerment of the Spirit became not only witnesses but also disciple-makers. Thus, one can call Luke's theology 'missiological pneumatology' or 'pneumatic missiology.' Without the 'witnessing' the presence of the Spirit has almost no meaning in Luke. One can say that the Holy Spirit is indeed the missionary Spirit. Also this empowering work of the Holy Spirit includes the ability to perform miracles as part of witnessing.

b) In Relation to Cho's Theology of Blessing

The immediate connection between the coming of the Spirit and 'power' has been clearly demonstrated in the Korean Pentecostal lifestyle. In fact, one of the most sought-after components for ministry has been 'power' among ministers. Many revival meetings or prayer mountains feature this,

even among non-Pentecostal Christians.

Without doubt, Cho's theology expressed through his ministries and preaching has a strong emphasis on this Pentecostal motto: 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.' As a good Pentecostal, he has defined this experience as baptism in the Holy Spirit. Directly and indirectly, he indicates that this spiritual experience is a watershed for a host of new revolutionary experiences. Coupled with Cho's theology of blessing, the 'empowerment' has been rightly interpreted as multi-dimensional. This is a new contextual development of the traditional Pentecostal theology which had seen the 'empowerment' strictly in the spiritual dimension. This is easily understood in the context of the strongly eschatological urgency among the early Pentecostals.

Cho's comprehensive understanding of 'empowerment' naturally adds physical and 'other life matters' to the traditional spiritual endowment. This creative contextualization was a sensitive attempt to make the Pentecostal message (historically and theologically formulated) relevant to the unique Korean socio-religious context. This holistic interpretation also comes from a Korean, or more specifically Asian, worldview where the spiritual and physical interact in a holistic interpretation and application of the gospel. It was not until the appearance of Cho's ministry that the other-worldly Christian worldview persisted, which grew firm during the harsh Japanese period (1910-1947) and the Korean War (1950-52). Even the popular indigenous Pentecostal traditions of Woon-mong Nah after the liberation

continued this martyr-like Christian worldview.⁴⁰

This comprehensive application of the Spirit's empowering ministry has virtually revolutionized Korean Christianity, in a way similar to the nation rising from its dire poverty in the 1970s and 80s. This message was also responsible for providing the dynamism which brought unprecedented growth to the Korean church in the same period.⁴¹ Cho and his Yoido Full Gospel Church provided a new paradigm for the Korean church across the denominational boundaries.

However, this empowerment is only the first half of the picture. The real and ultimate theological goal lies in the witnessing in Jerusalem, the whole of Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The theological goal was also shown in the historic development of the Pentecostal movement. From the very beginning, the Pentecostal movement was a mission movement. Within the first years of the Pentecostal outpouring in the Azusa Street Mission, several hundred Pentecostal missionaries preached the gospel throughout the world. A typical example is found among what Vinson Synan calls 'one-

way ticket missionaries'.⁴²

The formation of the Assemblies of God, the first Pentecostal 'denomination' after the Pentecostal breakout, was explicitly for fellowship among Pentecostal believers and for mission. Charles Parham, the 'father' of the Pentecostal movement argued from the very beginning that the gift of tongues was specifically intended for missionary tasks, bypassing tedious language learning processes through the supernatural 'empowerment' of the Holy Spirit.⁴³ Although Parham's initial belief was quickly proven untrue, this connection between the Pentecostal movement and mission, nonetheless continued as the bedrock of Pentecostal ethos.

The empowerment was rightly interpreted to be holistic, encompassing physical and material in addition to spiritual, and this is where theology of blessing and the spiritual empowerment are missiologically linked. This passage shows not only how the theological goal of empowerment has impacted Korean Christianity in the past, but also what a powerful potential it still has to explore. Once this theological goal is articulated as part of 'Full Gospel' theology, there is no doubt that the YFGC, its powerful daughter churches, its media arm and

40 For a detailed study on Nah, see Chang-soo Kang, 'An Analytical Study on the Life of Woon-Mong Na, Indigenous Korean Pentecostal' (Th.M. thesis, Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, 2003).

41 Wonsuk Ma, 'The Effect of Rev. Cho's Sermon Style for Church Growth and the Development of Theology', in *Charis and Charisma: David Yonggi Cho and the Growth of Yoido Full Gospel Church*, eds. Myung Sung-hoon and Hong Young-gi (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2003), 159-71.

42 Vinson Synan, *The Spirit Said 'Grow': The Astounding Worldwide Expansion of Pentecostal And Charismatic Churches* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1992), 39-48.

43 James R. Goff, Jr. 'Initial Tongues in the Theology of Charles Fox Parham,' in *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspectives on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*, ed. Gary B. McGee (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 57-71.

theological network will lead the worldwide Pentecostal family, particularly in the non-western world, with a distinct theological paradigm.

In the past, unfortunately, some programs and concepts uniquely developed by the YFGC have been further developed by someone else. For instance, the cell system has been theoretically further developed and popularized by Singaporean churches, church growth is now popularized by others through the 'natural church development' theory, and the traditionally 'Pentecostal' praise and worship movement in Korea has become a trademark of another church, just to mention a few.

V Conclusion

This study argues that the theology of blessing developed by David Yonggi Cho since the 1960s finds its legitimacy both in the socio-cultural context of Korea and in the pneumatic tradition of the Bible. Legitimacy, however, comes with clear limitations. Poverty in post-war Korea no longer exists today. In fact, in a generation, affluence has become the major threat to Christian spirituality. The religious orientation provides both legitimacy and limitations. Christianity is called to be relevant but also to transform the culture and religious orientations. Even the biblical evidence offers a strong basis for the theology of blessing, and yet it also shows it to go beyond expecting a good life. Christians are called to serve others and the kingdom of God.

1 Fundamental Issues

In spite of the hard-argued legitimacy

of the theology of blessing, a critical question remains, as the theology of blessing is by nature self-centred: What is the fundamental purpose and requirement of a Christian life? The broad teaching of the scriptures presents a radical lifestyle totally different from self-centred gratification; it is the other—or kingdom-centred life that is called for. Legitimacy for the theology of blessing ends with the prayer for daily bread for our own selves; it is 'may your kingdom come' that will determine the lifestyle of Jesus' followers as stipulated in the Beatitudes (Mat. 5).

Simplistic minds with deep orientation to blessing can develop a tendency to judge life according to the level of wealth and health. Suffering in God's economy is a part of reality, and this is not always due to sin (e.g., Job). Also it is important to be reminded that God has placed a moral requirement on his people. He is not to be treated as a magical formula for one's gain. This calls for a serious theological reflection on blessing, and its measurement as Christians.

Therefore, Christians will need to test the motive for asking for blessings. Then the limitation: Is what I ask for to meet my needs for sustenance or what I wish to have? Then means are tested: a combination of God's gracious intervention and hard work will be acceptable, but not the accumulation of wealth by oppressing others, directly or indirectly. This is a justice issue. Then ultimately what is the gift of blessing for? This is then a stewardship issue. How we view life's affairs under God's rulership is ultimately an exercise of authentic discipleship: lifestyle that emulates that of our Lord.

Then, the Christian life is far beyond our own comfort in this world; it is to be a life lived for others and for God's kingdom.

2 For Korean Christians and Beyond

After a period of unprecedented growth, the Korean church has lost momentum since the early 1990s, and the YFGC is not an exception. The Korean church as a whole has found mission as its solution, and this was a right choice. The growth dynamism has been successfully redirected to mission, and it has now a contingent of more than 20,000 cross-cultural missionaries. This missional development also provides an exceptionally conducive opportunity to make a timely adjustment in the theology of blessing, which was at the heart of the church growth dynamic.

There are two specific tasks ahead of the Korean church and the YFGC, especially in the post-Cho era. First, a close review of the popular understanding of mission among Korean Christians is necessary. The narrow definition of mission as preaching the gospel and planting local churches is over-simplistic and this no longer serves the missionary work of the Korean church. The Lausanne Covenant, which has become a solid guideline for evangelical mission, presents an excellent example for mission definition.

If the present narrow definition is applied, then there are too many Korean missionaries in places where there are more Christians than in Korea by ratio. For example, how can

one explain Korean missionaries in Zambia where Christianity is now the official religion of the country? Yet, Korean missionaries in Zambia, like many from other countries, have engaged in authentic and impressive missionary work by working with nationals to reach urban Muslims, caring for street children who lost their parents from AIDS, and others. A holistic mission understanding is urgent for the Korean church.

The second is the broader understanding of empowered mission. The notion of empowerment among Pentecostals has also been narrowly perceived, and this has not allowed Pentecostal missionaries to expand their mission thinking beyond proclamation and church planting under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The broader understanding of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit would allow Pentecostals to take and appropriate various elements as missional gift, be it spiritual, economical, circumstantial, and the like. There is potential that this can further enable them to take adverse circumstances (such as Paul's imprisonment or Stephen's martyrdom) as God's empowering act, thus challenging the self-centred interpretation of blessing.

This is where a historic responsibility and opportunity lies for the YFGC as the largest single congregation in the world. If the era of mega-churches is coming to an end and the new era of mission is here, then YFGC can again lead the mission engagements of the Korean church and beyond. The guiding principle is the holistic view of mission and empowerment. This is my modest theological prayer.

Disability and the Love of Wisdom: De-forming, Re-forming, and Per-forming Philosophy of Religion

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KEYWORDS: *Theodicy, freedom, virtue, suffering, afterlife, social context, epistemology*

I Introduction

My goal in this essay is to interrogate traditional approaches to philosophy of religion and philosophical theology from a disability studies perspective, rethinking along the way issues in theodicy, religious epistemology, and questions of death and the afterlife that are commonly treated in traditional textbooks on philosophy of religion. This is a conversation whose time is long overdue, as disability perspectives have been noticeably absent in even the most recent discussions in the philosophy of religion. I will argue that when the human experience of disability interfaces with the philosophical discussion of religion, one of the results is a 'performative philosophy of religion' whereby philosophical reflection does not exclude the speculative moment but is an activity that shapes

human dispositions, activities, and political life.

While there are an increasing number of disability studies, scholars who are trained philosophers as well as professional philosophers who have written on disability,¹ there has so far been no formal engagement with issues in the philosophy of religion. To be sure, theologians have spoken about issues in the philosophy of religion from disability perspectives,² but these have been taken up within a theological rather than philosophy of religion

1 The field of disability studies is relatively new but quickly developing. For an introduction, see Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006). In this essay, I use 'disability studies perspective' synonymously with 'disability perspective'.

2 See, e.g., my *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), and Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

framework. On the other side, besides issues in biomedical and social ethics, philosophy of education, philosophy of law, and disability as a socio-political construct (these are vitally important topics that need to be continually addressed), I also want to urge philosophers reflecting on disability to address topics in the philosophy of religion.

This is an important task for philosophical approaches to disability since it often deals, as we shall see, with assumptions at the worldview level for other philosophical and non-philosophical claims. In this essay, I propose to inform discussions in the philosophy of religion from disability studies perspectives, and in the process hope also to pave the way for philosophy of religion contributions to disability scholarship.

I will be working in this essay with a broad definition of 'disability' that is inclusive of both intellectual and physical impairments. In this view, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines a disability as 'any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being'.³ I would only note at present that while disabilities are inevitably individual experiences, the WHO's definition opens up to include a social component inasmuch as the performance of activities are measured according to social—'within a range considered normal'—conventions. As we proceed, it should

become evident that this social dimension is central to any substantive engagement between disability studies and philosophy. I will also provide more specific examples of disability as they relate to particular issues in the philosophy of religion.⁴

II Disability and the Problem of Evil: Destabilizing Traditional Theodicies

Philosophy of religion texts all address questions related to the problem of evil. Insofar as many traditional approaches discuss theological doctrines related to divine attributes—e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence—these in turn have implications for the question, Why does a good and all-powerful God allow bad things to happen to innocent people? Now there is no consensus in philosophy of religion about the viability of any theodicy proposal; in fact, the consensus seems to be, rather, that there are a plurality of theodicies, each with its own strengths, but all with sufficiently glaring weaknesses that incline some to give up on the project of formulating theodicy merely as a theoretical enterprise.⁵

4 For the record, I write not as a person with any known disability, but as a brother of a man with Down syndrome; hence the motivation of my work in this area (see also note 2 above).

5 For two critics of traditional theodicies along these lines, see Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), and Sarah Katherine Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Continental Thinkers Respond to the Holocaust* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

3 World Health Organization, *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps* (1980; reprint, Geneva: World Health Organization, 1993), 28.

As a theist, I do not think the task of constructing theodicies should be abandoned. At the same time, I agree that there are problems across the theodicy spectrum, and that these are further intensified when assessed in disability perspective. In the following, I briefly sketch four general types of theistic responses to the problem of evil and summarize unresolved questions from a disability point of view.

1. Ontological responses

First, there are what I call ontological and/or theological models designed to address the problem of evil. By this, I am referring to responses that understand evil as either intrinsically (ontologically) woven into the fabric of the universe or as being the result of God's (at least permissive) will for the world. In the former case, there are either cosmic dualist models such as Manicheanism or primordial chaos models such as that of E. S. Brightman and, more recently, Catherine Keller,⁶ any of which would alleviate God from responsibility for evil. The latter might involve either privation models like Augustine's in which evil has no ontological status of its own but is derivative from the lack of goodness, or more robust theological models like that of Calvin wherein evil is allowed or even decreed (for high Calvinists) by God in order to achieve God's greater glory.

Besides the standard criticisms of

each of these models, disability perspectives would add the following specific critical observations. Regarding dualist construals, there is the concern that disability is uncritically associated with evil, with the result that people with disabilities have been seen (historically) either to have in some way deserved the evil that has befallen them or to have personified the evils feared by (nondisabled) humanity.⁷

Primordial chaos models fare a bit better, especially if disabilities are statistically distributed (randomly) across the population. This is more palatable both for the appearance of congenital disabilities related to unpredictable genetic mutations and for those that occur later in life due to accidental circumstances. However, if disability is the result of the cosmic chaos that can never be eradicated, will disability also be present in the afterlife? We will return to this question below.

Augustine's privation model was premised on the goodness of God and of God's creation. Further, Augustine reasoned that if evil is the privation or lack of good, then insofar as anything exists, that in itself is good, whatever other lacks may be pertinent in that case. The result is that there is nothing existent that is wholly evil, since such would be nothing at all. On the one hand, this view affirms the humanity, dignity, and goodness of *people* with disabilities, without insisting that the disabilities are necessarily good. On

⁶ E.g., Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *Personality and Religion* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1934), 71-100, and Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁷ That disabilities, and people with them, are feared by nondisabled people is well documented—e.g., Irwin Katz, *Stigma: A Social Psychological Analysis* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1981).

the other hand, for some people with disabilities, their disabilities are neither merely the lack of ability nor the lack of something else; rather, their disabilities are palpable realities that cannot be explained away through the notion of privation. For them, the notion of evil as lack, while perhaps philosophically interesting, is neither phenomenologically nor existentially satisfying.⁸

Finally perhaps the most challenging theological model for people with disabilities is that associated with or implied in the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Admittedly there are some who have come to terms with their disabilities as playing an important role in God's overall plan. The problem arises, however, when people with disabilities are told by the nondisabled that their disabilities are part of God's plan for their lives. It is one thing for an individual to come to accept his or her disability as the result of God's intentions, and embrace this as his or her own self-understanding; it is quite another for others to be told by well-meaning and able-bodied people that God has basically chosen to inflict their disabilities

for God's own reasons.⁹ In the latter case, rather than concluding that God can indeed be trusted, God may instead become the one who, for no apparent reason at all, has arbitrarily chosen to wreck their lives. There are pastoral issues involved here, but the fundamental question remains theological: did or did not God choose to make me the way I am?

2. Freewill Theodicy

A second type of theistic response to the problem of evil is what is often called the freewill theodicy. This position involves a family of related views that suggest the problem of evil either is the result of creaturely freedom unleashed by the fall of humankind or by the primordial fall of angels, or is related, for process theodicies, to the intrinsic freedom that pertains, in varying degrees of strength, to all creatures and even created things.¹⁰ For advocates of the freewill defence, God is not ultimately responsible for evil; rather, God chose to create a world of free creatures because such a world is better than one without freedom. But free creatures can choose to commit evil acts, or to act in ways that bring about evil consequences.

Thus, the freewill defence emphasizes creaturely responsibility for

8 It is with great difficulty that the notion of evil as privation fits into the rugged and honest portrayal of life with disabilities in autobiographical accounts of disability—e.g., Robert F. Murphy, *The Body Silent* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987); Leonard Kriegel, *Flying Solo: Reimagining Manhood, Courage, and Loss* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Hugh Gregory Gallagher, *Black Bird Fly Away: Disabled in an Able-Bodied World* (Arlington, Vir.: Vandamere Press, 1998); and Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

9 I discuss this issue in my *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 167-69.

10 The most prominent advocate of process theodicy is David Ray Griffin; see his two books, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), and *Evil Revisited: Responses and Reconsiderations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

moral evil, but also suggests that natural evil is the result of a fallen world suffering the effects of actions perpetuated by rebellious spiritual beings known in the Christian tradition as Satan, the Devil, or demons (other fallen angels). For process theodicies, the suffering caused by natural disasters (natural evil) is an unavoidable outcome of the way that the world is, and in this regard overlaps with cosmic dualist or primordial chaos responses to the problem of evil.

How might disability perspectives interact with freewill theodicies? I suggest that disability approaches may gravitate away from versions of the freewill defence involving spirit beings and toward those which emphasize human freedom. The chief concern with locating the blame for evil on a primordial fall of angels is that this kind of speculative theodicy does little to either motivate or inform our present engagement with disability and the issues it raises.

The other side of this rationale is also why disability perspectives might be drawn toward the freewill defence: that it rightly focuses on all of the ways in which human freedom exacerbates the experience of disability. Yet disability advocates caution against the traditional association of freedom and evil in this case. This is because as traditionally articulated, the various amendments of the freewill defence have been called on to either justify why disabilities happen to people with them (i.e., because of their sin, carelessness, or irresponsibility), or to enable a sort of resigned posture in the face of human evils (e.g., of wars and its consequences).

However, a disability perspective

would insist that the freewill defence should not be interpreted only at the level of if and how it may relate to *individuals* with disabilities. Rather there is a social dimension to disability, as signalled earlier in our working definition of disability.

In this wider framework, the suffering experienced by people with intellectual or physical impairments is in some cases aggravated by and in other cases fully derived from the social, economic, and political structures that impinge on their lives.¹¹ Evil in this perspective originates systemically and structurally from the ableism that discriminates, excludes, and oppresses people with disabilities.¹²

The freewill theodicy rightly calls attention to the role of creaturely freedom in causing and perpetuating evil, not in terms of people with disabilities receiving what is due for their sins, but in terms of identifying the social

11 For explication of these themes, see Hanoch Livneh, 'On the Origins of Negative Attitudes toward People with Disabilities', in Robert P. Marinelli and Arthur E. Dell Orto, eds., *The Psychological and Social Impact of Disability*, 3rd ed. (New York: Springer, 1991), 181-98, and Asiah Mason, et al., 'Prejudice toward People with Disabilities', in Jean Lau Chin, ed., *The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination*, vol. 4, *Disability, Religion, Physique, and Other Traits* (Westport, Conn., and London: Praeger, 2004), 51-92.

12 Ableism is manifest in the belief of the majority nondisabled in their superiority, and it privileges the nondisabled. Society is culpable in discrimination against those with disabilities as ableism operates individually, culturally and institutionally. See Fiona Kumari Campbell's recent *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

dynamics that cause harm and suffering in the lives of those with disabilities. When put in this way, however, evil is neither merely 'explained' nor 'justified'; rather, the sources of evil are named in order that the status quo can be addressed and dismantled. And this must be the collaborative work of both people with and without disabilities.

3. Soul-making Theodicy

A third type of response to the problem of evil has been called the 'soul-making theodicy'. Given this label by John Hick,¹³ the basic outline actually is traced back to the early church father, Irenaeus of Lyons, and emphasizes that evil has been (at least) allowed by God because of its formative capacities for the development of moral virtues. Thus within the divine scheme of things, evil is soul-shaping: it produces that kind of virtuous character that comes about only when people persevere through the suffering and tragedy.

The main questions with this Irenaean theodicy from a disability perspective are threefold. First, whose souls are being made and why? Why is it that in this model, it is generally thought that the souls of people with disabilities are assumed to be in need of shaping?

Second, even if it is not assumed that disabilities are designed to shape the souls of people with them, nevertheless this model presumes an instrumental approach to disability; and in this case, the lives of people with dis-

abilities become the means through which 'nondisabled' souls can be bettered. Without denying the formative value of experiences of suffering, a disability perspective would caution against instrumentalizing the pain and suffering of a select group of people for the gains of others. Even if not specifically put this way, this is how the rhetoric of the soul-making theodicy is interpreted by people with disabilities.¹⁴

Finally, the question arises from a disability perspective which also plagues theodicies in general: are *all* experiences of disability (in particular) and evil (in general) soul-making? Are there not wholly gratuitous evils which defy any efforts to be rendered meaningful, even for those who believe that some experiences of disability and suffering can be virtue-forming?

4. Christological Response

The last type of response to the problem of evil is the recent articulation in specifically Christian theological circles of God as entering into the suffering of the world, especially but not only in the cross of Jesus Christ. Although with roots deep in the theological tradition, this 'suffering God' view has

¹⁴ Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 260, raises a parallel question about how the 'we' who learn from suffering are often the 'paradigmatically white, wealthy, highly privileged, and often male philosophers of religion.' My point is to question how 'we' nondisabled folk can so easily lay the burden of educating the human race on folk with disabilities.

¹³ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (1966; reprint, London: Fontana, 1968), part III.

been revived since the appearance of Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, and is currently gaining widespread adherence in theology-and-science circles.¹⁵ What is attractive about this proposal is its admitting the intractability of the problem of evil, while yet insisting that God is not removed from our suffering but has entered into and embraced such in God's own life.

On the one side, disability perspectives will welcome such a theodicy insofar as it neither stigmatizes the experiences of suffering connected with disability nor marginalizes people because of their disabilities. On the other side, as with theodicies of the primordial chaos (above) and even amidst the insistence that the 'suffering God' is not a weak deity but a strong survivor, there are those who would question whether or not such a motif is sufficiently consoling for those who labour under the pain and tragedy that accompany the experience of some disabilities.

5. The problem of evil and the social context

Before proceeding, two summary comments are in order. First, as may be intuited from the foregoing, disability is difficult to categorize with regard to the problem of evil. On the one hand, the sufferings related to disability are in many cases classifiable under 'natural evil' insofar as they may be results of the

workings of nature; on the other hand, the social character of disability also means that much of its attendant sufferings come under the category of 'moral evil'. Beyond these, however, certain congenital disabilities—not Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, which is clearly related to human responsibility, but genetically or chromosomally related syndromes like trisomy 21 (Down syndrome)—are neither merely natural nor moral evils in terms of their etiologies.

For theistic traditions, of course, this raises the theodicy question in earnest: how can an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God allow such evils in the world? Yet the answer cannot be simply saying that God will in the end 'heal' such individuals of their genetic variation, as it is difficult to imagine how someone with trisomy-21 (for example) can be the same person without that chromosomal configuration. In these cases, God's not allowing the trisomic mutation would be God's not allowing the appearance of precisely that person. There may be no way, in this case, to eradicate the disability without eliminating the person.¹⁶ I will return to this question in the conclusion.

The second observation is that, as is already clear, disability scholarship has long insisted on defining the experience of disability, including any suffering and evil that might be involved, in social terms. In this framework, disability perspective highlights the social and political character of the nature of

¹⁵ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. John Bowden and R. A. Wilson (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), and John Polkinghorne, ed., *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas makes exactly this point in his 'Marginalizing the "Retarded"', in Flavian Dougherty, ed., *The Deprived, the Disabled, and the Fullness of Life* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), 67-105, esp. 69.

evil often absent in able-ist discussions of theodicy. Evil is neither a spiritual problem to be solved by a proper theology (or theodicy) nor an individual problem to be borne by people who embraced the soul-making character of their experiences. Rather, there is an irreducible social and relational aspect to all human experience, the experience of disability not exempted.¹⁷ If so, then any theodicy that disregards this social and relational dimension cannot speak convincingly into the disability community.

It may be that when all is said and done, disability perspectives can only point toward an eschatological resolution for the unresolved challenges for theodicy (see further below). On the other hand, people with disabilities cannot only wait for God's eschatological response, and in that case, the questions and categories of traditional philosophy of religion need to be revised in order to take disability perspectives into account.

III Disability and Religious Epistemology: Retrieving/Redeeming Subjugated Knowledges

At this point in our dialogue between disability studies and the philosophy of religion, it is worthwhile to focus more intentionally on the epistemological question of how and why disability per-

spectives make a difference in philosophy of religion. What justifies the argumentative force of disability experiences here? I suggest that disability perspectives contribute significantly to the chorus of postmodern voices resisting the Enlightenment and Eurocentric hegemony in traditional philosophy of religion. In contrast to the traditional emphases on the *if*, *how*, or *what* of religious experience, postmodern and disability approaches focus instead on the *so what* and *so that* questions.

To be more precise, building on the preceding discussion, I argue that the experiences of people with various sensory or mental limitations call into question the conventional categories and assumptions of philosophy of religion; they also supplement religious knowledge through insights largely unavailable to nondisabled epistemic viewpoints, and finally, they engage other modes of knowing than those dominant in traditional philosophical reflection. The following explicates each of these claims.

1. New approaches to Philosophy of Religion

To begin, I note that the experience of disability brings to the fore new categories and assumptions to the task of philosophy of religion. We have already seen these movements at work in our discussion of the theodicy question above. To press home this point, I call attention to the work of Christian theologian, Nancy Eiesland.¹⁸ Drawing

¹⁷ John Swinton, 'Constructing Persons: Macmurray and the Social Construction of Disability', in David Fergusson and Nigel Power, eds., *John Macmurray: Critical Perspectives* (New York Peter Lang, 2002), 239-47.

¹⁸ Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

from her lifelong experience of disability (with a form of degenerative bone disease), Eiesland suggests, for example, that what people with disabilities like hers need is not a miraculous cure or healing but a more just, inclusive, and hospitable world. In fact, in response to the idea that she would be made whole in heaven, Eiesland says, 'having been disabled from birth, I came to believe that in heaven I would be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God. My disability has taught me who I am and who God is.'¹⁹

In contrast, then, to traditional philosophy of religion's focus on the possibility (or not) of miracles, a disability approach to the topic highlights instead a liberating God (the central theme of Eiesland's theology and philosophy of disability). Whereas traditional philosophy of religion has been perennially devoted to explicating the attribute of divine omnipotence, Eiesland's disability perspective identifies instead the 'disabled God':

...I had waited for a mighty revelation of God. But my epiphany bore little resemblance to the God I was expecting or the God of my dreams. I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to maneuver by blowing and sucking on a strawlike device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God

as a survivor, un pitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged 'not feasible', 'unemployable', with 'questionable quality of life'. Here was God for me.²⁰

And finally, Eiesland's disability viewpoint brings the philosophy of beauty (aesthetics) back into dialogue with philosophy of religion, albeit through the most unexpected of sources: that of the disabled body:

Most people with disabilities see our bodies not as signs of deviance or deformity, but as images of beauty and wholeness. We discern in our bodies, not only the ravages of injustice and pain, but also the reality of surviving with dignity.²¹

In each of these ways, the disability perspective re/introduces treasures old and new—justice, liberation, and beauty—to the task of philosophy of religion.

2. New perspectives

I suggest in addition that disability perspectives supplement religious knowledge through insights that are largely unavailable to the nondisabled. This is evident, for example, in the work of John Hull, a British theologian who became totally blind.²² In learning to read the Bible again from a non-sighted perspective, Hull came to 'see' that the

¹⁹ Nancy Eiesland, 'Liberation, Inclusion, and Justice: A Faith Response to Persons with Disabilities', *Impact* 14/3 (2001-2002), 2-3 and 35, quotation from 2.

²⁰ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 89.

²¹ Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 115.

²² John M. Hull, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2001).

Bible is written by sighted persons, and this explains why the majority of its readers do not question the sighted assumptions behind many of the metaphors that equate blindness with ignorance, unbelief, lostness, unworthiness, or despair. Further, a non-sighted perspective is able to retrieve and reappropriate many of the blind characters in the biblical narrative and focus instead on the full range of human issues revealed through these lives rather than reduce them to flat identities dominated by their blindness.

Last but not least, a non-sighted reading of the Bible recognizes Jesus' tactile or 'hands-on' approach to people as well as his willingness to undergo blindness (through being blindfolded during the passion) for the sake of experiencing solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. Hull concludes that God 'himself' is beyond sightedness or blindness; rather, a close reading of the Bible from a non-sighted point of view reveals that God is not only at home in darkness but also is active amidst the darkness to accomplish his purposes.

3. Other modes of knowing

Hull's proposals are not easily verifiable except through the experience of non-sightedness. That is why I have identified his epistemic viewpoint as one that supplements insights otherwise unavailable to 'normal' epistemic processes. This leads also to my third claim: that disability experiences engage other modes of knowing than those dominant in traditional philosophical reflection. Here, I am talking not only about how non-sighted per-

spectives can supplement sighted ones; rather, I want to call attention to non-cognitive and non-rational modes of knowing that are more or less absent in philosophy of religion discussions, but are prevalent in the lives of people with severe or profound intellectual disabilities.

My own interests in disability studies, motivated in part through growing up with a brother with a moderate form of intellectual disability, has focused on the religious knowing of people without even the 'basic beliefs' identified by some philosophers of religion.²³ I am concerned here with the connections between how people with intellectual disabilities know in general, and what that means for religious epistemology. In the case of those with severe or profound retardation, how can what they know even be determined, and who can or should speak on behalf of the intellectually disabled?

Amidst this set of questions and others like them, time spent with people with intellectual disabilities soon reveals that there are modes of knowing in operation that may either precede or transcend the intellect, or both.²⁴ Rather than a rationalist episte-

²³ Here, I am referring to the school of Reformed epistemology; see, e.g., Dewey J. Hoitenga, Jr., *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), esp. ch. 7.

²⁴ Put in philosophical terms, Blaise Pascal said that, 'The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing'; cp. William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

mology or a propositionalist form of communication, people across the spectrum of intellectual disabilities engage the world and their significant others through affective, embodied, and relational forms of knowing. The difference in the cases of severe and profound disabilities is that these may be the only forms of knowing, but none of this is registered by ableist perspectives.

The result is not mysticism, as traditionally discussed in philosophy of religion texts—at least not in most cases—but simply the foregrounding of these basic modes of affective, embodied, and relational knowing that have been generally overlooked in traditional philosophy of religion. More specifically, then, if people with intellectual disabilities do not depend primarily on cognitive modes of knowing, then their religious knowing will also be similarly independent.

In this framework, we come to see that the divine or transcendent is mediated through the ‘ordinary’ forms of affective, embodied, and relational experiences that are operative in the background of all human knowing.²⁵ And whereas discussions of religious epistemology in traditional philosophy of religion may be preoccupied with questions related to the evidential reliability of or justification for truth claims, the religious epistemology of people with intellectual disabilities will be more focused instead on affective and embodied aspects of that

which is good, beautiful, and even true. What emerge are divergent perspectives on received questions (and answers) which most traditional discussions in religious epistemology have not taken into account.

4. Disability perspectives

These examples drawn from the experiences of people with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities lead to the following two summary remarks. First, the religious knowledge of people with disabilities has been understandably marginalized in philosophy of religion simply because they have not been involved in such discussions. Now, although this situation is gradually changing, it remains true that the case needs to be made for securing rather than marginalizing disability perspectives from the philosophy of religion roundtable. Ableist resistance will dismiss disability voices as just another politically correct imposition on an existing conversation.

Yet if all knowledge is political in some respect (and no knowledge is non-political),²⁶ then such ableist assumptions need to be questioned and this can only be done from within the experience of disability that has traditionally been relegated to the underside of history. And the emphasis needs to be on disability *perspectives* (in the plural) since, as should be clear from the preceding, there is no one or

²⁵ I expand on this in my *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 180-91; see also the literature cited there.

²⁶ As argued by Michael Schillmeier, ‘Othering Blindness—On Modern Epistemological Politics’, *Disability and Society* 21:5 (2006), 471-84.

essential disability experience;²⁷ rather, there are various kinds of disabilities, and each voice needs to be heard on its own terms.

Second, with the emergence of disability epistemologies in philosophy of religion, the focus shifts from the merits or demerits of religious beliefs and their evidential reliability to a discussion of the hope, attitudes, and affections related to religious life. Some religious epistemologists are being more sensitive to these matters,²⁸ although most discussions of religious epistemology remain absorbed with the traditional questions related to the cognitive and rational aspects of religious experience. Far from rejecting the important discussions about faith and reason in philosophy of religion, disability perspectives require that faith is understood not just in terms of cognitively held beliefs, but as pervasive over the many domains of human experience.

This much wider epistemological spectrum means that disability perspectives suggest a third way between or beyond the debate between advocates of a pre-theoretical (mystical) religious experience on the one side

and proponents of a religious experience that is linguistically and textually mediated on the other. While religious knowledge remains predominantly mediated by a tradition, yet in cases where such knowing is not cognitively dependent, there are alternative forms of engagement through which people can and do come to embody the true, the good, and the beautiful.

IV Disability, Death, and the Afterlife: Reappropriating Visions of Eternity

So far we have seen that disability perspectives can help retrieve subjugated epistemologies and reinvigorate the philosophical discussion. In this section, I wish to invoke disability viewpoints to explore discussions about death and the afterlife in philosophy of religion.

From a disability perspective, western discussions about the possibility and mode of the afterlife are just as problematic as eastern religious and philosophical views regarding karmic reincarnation. Further, traditional philosophical debates regarding the retention of personal identity in the afterlife are especially convoluted when viewed from the standpoints of the wide range of intellectual and physical disabilities, not only in terms of congenital conditions, but also in terms of how human lives are shaped over time by capacities, environments, and relationships. Finally, traditional individualistic notions of heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, are also problematic when disability perspectives are factored into the conversation.

27 This pluralism applies both to the spectrum of physical and intellectual disabilities; see, e.g., Karen Fiser, 'Philosophy, Disability, and Essentialism', in Lawrence Foster and Patricia Herzog, *Defending Diversity: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives on Pluralism and Multiculturalism* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 83-101.

28 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Religious Epistemology', in William J. Wainwright, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 245-71, esp. 246-47.

In examining each of these issues briefly, I will argue that the human experience of disability upsets traditional formulations in philosophy of religion and encourages philosophers (and disabilities scholars) to look for other resources within the discourses of philosophy and religion to fashion alternative eschatological scenarios that will be, in turn, more inclusive of the experiences of persons with disabilities in the here and now.²⁹

Traditionally, three major questions regarding the afterlife have received the bulk of the attention: First, is there or is there not an afterlife? This question has been especially persistent since the Enlightenment and its attendant materialistic, naturalistic, and positivistic worldviews. Second, if there is an afterlife, what is the relationship between what has traditionally been labelled the human soul and the body? On this question, the traditional Platonic dualism between soul and body has been more recently challenged by monistic, emergentist, and non-reductive physicalist construals of the mind-body relationship. This leads to the third question: what is the nature of the body in the afterlife? Especially in the Christian discussions in the philosophy of religion, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body has been the subject of extensive consideration. I will take up the first question before dealing with the latter two.

From a disability perspective, the question about whether or not there is an afterlife induces mixed responses.

On the one hand, people with disabilities come from a wide spectrum of religious and philosophical positions, and for those who are drawn to materialism or naturalism in various respects, the idea of an afterlife is no more coherent than for nondisabled people with similar views. Then there are also those with disabilities who cannot bear the thought of 'more of the same' in terms of 'living' eternally with their disability conditions.³⁰ On the other hand, many people with disabilities, including most who are religious, have hoped for and believed in an afterlife in which they are free from their disabilities. For them, to even question the possibility of the afterlife is to question ultimate (cosmic and divine) justice. From this point of view, the injustice they have experienced in this life—whether it be the result of bad luck (chance mutations producing congenital disabilities) or moral irresponsibility—will be vindicated in the next.

This same rationale renders less attractive notions of reincarnation derived from Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, the major alternative presented in traditional philosophy of religion discussions on the afterlife. If reincarnation is driven by karma, then either bad karma in a previous life has produced the present life with disability, or the present life with disability puts one at a disadvantage of producing good karma for the next life, or both. The hope of people with disabilities in general, then, is

²⁹ The following expands my chapter on eschatology in *Theology and Down Syndrome*, ch. 9.

³⁰ Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 311-12, touches briefly on this matter.

dominated by visions of an afterlife in which the challenges associated with their conditions will be no more.

But if people desire an afterlife free from their disabilities, then the second and third questions regarding the nature of the afterlife in philosophy of religion become pertinent. For people with disabilities, however, these questions about personal identity expose a different set of concerns. For some people with physical disabilities, there is no question that the belief in the resurrection means nothing less than a fully capable and whole body.

For others with various types of sensory and physical disabilities, things may not be so simple. For example, if people who are members of Deaf culture anticipate, 'when we get to heaven, the signing will be tremendous!' what does that mean for hearing members in the afterlife?³¹ How will the congenitally blind, who have learned to 'see' with their hands and ears,³² be given the beatific vision? Will people who have lived most of their lives with prostheses be resurrected with what has become, for all intents and purposes, an integral aspect of their identity?³³ In fact, if

Jesus' resurrected body retained the impairments in his hands, side, and feet, is that not suggestive that the resurrected bodies of people with disabilities will also retain signs of their impairments in the world to come? This is exactly how some people with disabilities think they will recognize their patron saints, through the presence of impairments through which they 'earned' their sainthood.³⁴

These are questions about the continuity and discontinuity between the present life and the afterlife: if the discontinuity is too great, the sense of personal identity is threatened; if the continuity is too great, then the discontinuity posited between the present finite body and the anticipated resurrected body is undermined.

This question of continuity and discontinuity also presents itself, as already noted, with regard to people with intellectual disabilities. Parallel to the question about what happens to those who die as infants, with what bodies and what kind of personal identities will these people be resurrected in the afterlife? The major difference is that for the severely and profoundly disabled, some will die with adult bod-

31 See Roger Hitching, *The Church and Deaf People: A Study of Identity, Communication and Relationships with Special Reference to the Ecclesiology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Milton Keynes, UK, and Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2004), passim.

32 Gunnar Karlsson, 'The Experience of Spatiality for Congenitally Blind People: A Phenomenological-Psychological Study', *Human Studies* 19 (1996), 303-30.

33 E.g., as explored in Marquard Smith and Joanna Morra, eds., *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

34 See the discussion of Saint Margaret of Castello, a limped, hunched, blind, and dwarfed woman who accomplished over 200 miracles and was beatified in 1609, as reflected on through the life of a man with cerebral palsy, in Robert Orsi, "'Mildred, is it fun to be a cripple?': The Culture of Suffering in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Catholicism", in Thomas J. Ferraro, ed., *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 19-64.

ies but undeveloped minds.³⁵ Another no less challenging scenario involves the resurrection of those who suffer brain damage and/or the loss of memory and yet survive for many years before death.³⁶ Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the question of personal identity relates to people with chromosomal variations which are what might be called identity-constitutive, such as trisomy 21 (Down syndrome). For these, 'Could someone imagine their daughter with Down's syndrome as being her true self in the new heaven and new earth without some manifestation of her condition?'³⁷

In each of these cases, and many others, personal identity is understood not only in terms of cognitive self-consciousness, but (as seen in our earlier discussions on epistemology) in terms of bodily structures, affective dispositions, and interpersonal relations. On these issues, reflections on the afterlife pose other questions than just those related to the mind-body problem, or *if* there will an embodied existence.

But it is precisely the interpersonal and inter-relational aspects of identity foregrounded by disability experiences that raise the final and perhaps most important set of questions for philosophical reflections on the afterlife. There are at least two aspects to the issues involved. On the one hand, there is the question about the deep interpersonal and inter-subjective bonds that often develop between people with severe and profound disabilities and their caregivers.³⁸ To be sure, all people are interdependent on others in significant ways. However, the intense dependence in these specific cases form, shape, and irrevocably mark the identities of both those with disabilities and their caregivers. If such relationships are severed in the afterlife, it is difficult to conceive of how continuity is maintained for these persons.

On the other hand, we have already mentioned that the suffering of people with disabilities is often socially constructed. Beyond issues of social injustice, however, there are also issues related to the discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion perpetuated at the interpersonal level. From a disability perspective, eschatological vindication in the afterlife does not necessarily have to take the form of punitive assessments against their tormentors. At the same time, the experiences of persecution suffered by people with

35 Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1990), 61-69.

36 The most highlighted case, although by no means the only type of memory loss situation, is Alzheimer's disease. David Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), suggests that God is the rememberer or historian whose eschatological salvation consists in preserving and restoring to creatures our memories of being the beloved people of God.

37 Cited in Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds. 'Biblical and Theological Reflections on Disability', in *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1998), 429-37, quotation from 435.

38 This involves parents and children, as well as spouses. But they could also emerge in professional relationships between caregivers and their clients. For philosophical reflection from the caregiver point of view, see Barbara Hillyer, *Feminism and Disability* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

disabilities cannot be overlooked. This means that the final reconciliation will include a social dimension in which those with disabilities will be reconciled with their nondisabled oppressors.³⁹ Not coincidentally, I suggest, Jesus' parable of the eschatological banquet included the blind, lame, and crippled (Lk. 14:13, 21), just as they were, rather than only after they had been healed.

Ultimately, justice, at least in the form of inclusion, must prevail if meaning is to be found in lives previously deemed unworthy of serious consideration. In this way, traditional discussions of heaven, hell, and the afterlife will factor in the complex webs of relationships that bind together people with disabilities and those who have wronged them.

In this discussion, I have refrained from postulating too many concrete proposals for thinking about the afterlife in disability perspective. Rather, my strategy has been to suggest questions derived from disability experiences that have not been posed in traditional discussions on the afterlife in philosophy of religion. In the end, asking the right questions about the afterlife has implications for how we conduct business in the present life.

If we think that the afterlife is a

'magical' fix for all the challenges posed by disability, then we may be more inclined to simply encourage people with disabilities (as has long been done) to bear up under their lot in life and await God's eschatological healing for their lives. Yet this assumes that the task of responding to the issues of disability belongs to God, and it also assumes that disability is primarily (perhaps only) an individual affair.

I have maintained throughout this essay, however, that there is an intractable social dimension to disability, and how we think about the afterlife shapes our vision for the present one. If life in the hereafter manifests the divine and cosmic justice we all hope for, and also includes people with disabilities in a sense just as they are—see, for example, the parable of the eschatological banquet at which the blind, lame, and deaf are included (Luke 14:1-24)—then such notions of justice and inclusion should also guide our present efforts.

V Conclusion: Enabling a Performative Philosophy of Religion

My goal in this essay has been to interrogate traditional approaches to philosophy of religion from a disability studies perspective. We have focused our attention on issues in theodicy, religious epistemology, and questions of death and the afterlife, and used them as springboards to register disability perspectives on philosophy of religion topics. One of the most glaring issues has been the absence of disability perspectives in traditional philosophy of religion.

³⁹ For a discussion of the many layers of justice in disability perspective, see Jeffrey C. Kirby, 'Disability and Justice: A Pluralistic Account', *Social Theory and Practice* 30:2 (2004), 229-46; for consideration of the social dimension of justice in eschatological perspective, see Miroslav Volf, 'The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on the Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition', *Modern Theology* 16:1 (2000), 91-113.

It might even be said that one of the 'evils' of theodicy has been the ignorance, neglect, and marginalization of disability voices. In this case, the first steps to any viable theodicy will need to retrieve and include such disability perspectives. As in the wider philosophical, political, and scholarly issues, the mantra of people with disabilities, 'Nothing about us without us!' applies also to the philosophy of religion.⁴⁰

When disability perspectives are recorded, however, the discussion is redirected toward what I call a praxis-oriented philosophy of religion.⁴¹ By this, I mean that even granting the speculative moment in philosophy of religion, disability perspectives will insist that such moments in the long run will need to invigorate the moral, social, and political practices that facilitate the healing of human life. Such healing is, arguably, the goal of all philosophical activity which loves wisdom and of religious activity which seeks to incarnate love. In other words, *philosophia*—the love of wisdom—in disability perspective cannot be neutral regarding the bringing about the things of which wisdom speaks:

⁴⁰ James I. Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability, Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁴¹ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

goodness, truth, beauty, and justice. Put alternatively, in philosophy of religion perspective, philosophical reflection is sustained by that which religion in its own way seeks to realize: love—the love of God, the love for God, and the love of human beings for one another.

When brought together in disability perspective, wisdom and love are neither merely theoretical notions nor theological speculations; rather, they become the stuff by which philosophical reflection is supposed to be transformed so that the world might be changed. In the end, then, perhaps disability perspectives will not only destabilize traditional formulations in philosophy of religion, but ultimately serve to rehabilitate philosophy of religion in ways that enable the proper performance of wisdom to manifest the good, true, and beautiful that is the stuff of authentic spirituality and piety.⁴²

⁴² This article is a shorter version of "Disability and the Love of Wisdom: De-forming, Re-forming, and Per-forming Philosophy of Religion", *Ars Disputandi: The Online Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (2009): 54-71, reprinted with permission from the editors of the journal. Readers interested in following up the issues raised here should consult the much more extensive references documented in the *Ars Disputandi* essay. Thanks to Thomas Schirrmacher for inviting its reprinting, and to my GA, Timothy Lim Teck Ngern, for his help in ensuring the cohesiveness of the article through the process of my shortening it.

Scratching the Itch: Paul's Athenian Speech Shaping Mission Today

Susan Campbell

Keywords: Culture, gospel, contextualisation, cross-cultural communication, discernment

PAUL'S SPEECH, RECORDED in Acts 17:16-34, and the events surrounding it, have been described as 'the most outstanding example of intercultural evangelistic witness in the New Testament'.¹ Scholars regard Paul as a masterful mission practitioner and this passage portrays him at his best, communicating the gospel with creativity and skill. Through reflecting on this text, we are 'invited to discover paradigms that might inform, guide, and suggest parameters for the ongoing task of enabling the gospel to come to life in new settings'.²

I Settings for mission:
*'innovation and adventure'*³

Paul may have never intended, nor included in his missionary strategy, to preach in Athens as he was simply waiting there for Timothy and Silas (v.16).⁴ Yet Paul did not view this waiting period as 'down time' and he took every available opportunity to share the gospel. This is a challenge for western Christians in our segmented and compartmentalized lives. Mission should not end when we come home from an ESL lesson, unpack from summer mission trip or fly home for sabbatical.

While Paul spent time teaching in the synagogue, his most significant ministry occurred in the marketplace

¹ Dean Flemming, *Contextualisation in the New Testament: Patterns for theology and mission* (England: Apollos, 2005), 72.

² Dean Flemming, 'Contextualising the Gospel in Athens: Paul's Areopagus address as a paradigm for missionary communication', *Missiology* 30 No. 2 April 2002, 199-214.

³ Anthony B. Robinson and Robert W. Wall, *Called to be Church: The books of Acts for a new day* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 223.

⁴ Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: realities, strategies and methods* (Illinois: Intervarsity, 2008), 99.

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and at the city council, the Areopagus. Paul was 'out there on their turf',⁵ engaging with those on the margins or outside the synagogue. He displayed skill and diversity by his interactions with various groups including religious people, onlookers and bystanders and sophisticated, elite philosophers.

Paul's model invites Christians to resist huddling together only to maintain the spiritual health and happiness of 'insiders' and instead seek to minister among non-Christians in commercial, scholarly and public environments. In addition to traditional mission settings, we require people who can 'gossip the gospel'⁶ in informal settings, debate with intellectuals and express truth creatively among artists. This challenge is confronting for those who make claims of concern for the wider world yet resist authentic engagement.⁷

II The importance of observation:

*'it all began with his eyes'*⁸

Paul begins his speech by describing his observations as he walked through the city (v.23). 'He did not just "notice" the idols. He looked and looked, and thought and thought, until the fires of holy indignation were kindled within him'.⁹ Paul's skill was seen in making

considered observations and then reflecting on the implications for Athenian spirituality.¹⁰ The order of Paul's actions is important: 'He saw, he felt, he spoke.'¹¹

Paul's model is critical for mission today. People do not appreciate the arrogance of missionaries who keenly rush in with words, sermons and doctrine, yet fail to spend considerable time watching, listening and learning. We need to assume the posture of astute and humble students of culture, listening sensitively, approaching carefully and taking time. 'We must study [others'] religion—preferably by reading their own writers, by observing their practices, and by talking to their adherents.'¹²

Christians in all settings would benefit from training on how to watch effectively, listen deeply, question thoroughly and notice cultural cues. Churches also need to give the cross-cultural workers they support the freedom to incorporate years of cultural learning without feeling the pressure of fast 'results'.

III Responding from within:

*'our hearts should ache and our eyes blur at what we see around us'*¹³

As Paul observed the city, he was

5 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 222.

6 John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (England: Intervarsity, 1990), 281.

7 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 222.

8 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 291.

9 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 291.

10 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 216.

11 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 291.

12 Ajith Fernando, 'Acts': *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 479.

13 R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The church afire* (Illinois: Crossway, 1996), 230-231.

deeply distressed to see the city full of idols (v16). 'Deeply' translates the Greek phrase that means 'his spirit within him' and refers to his inner spiritual life.¹⁴ There is conjecture about whether Paul's emotion was that of anger, fury, compassion, irritation or exasperation. The main point here is that Paul felt. He was moved in his being and stirred by the Spirit within him.

Paul did not respond with irrational anger or temper and he did not disclose his emotion to the philosophers.¹⁵ Courtesy was displayed for the sake of sensitive communication.

Like Paul, we must be 'alert to God's guidance and ready to adapt quickly to...unexpected situations'.¹⁶ Self-awareness and discernment are critical for listening not only to the culture around, but also to the Spirit within. Many of us struggle to listen to God within us, confused and distracted by the cacophony of noise in our hyper-stimulated, technology-soaked environment. A major reason why the church slumbers peacefully on and its people are deaf to Christ's commission and tongue-tied in testimony is that we do not feel as Paul felt.¹⁷ The Spirit has not stopped stirring, however we have not been still, alert or in-tune enough to take notice.

IV A jealous God: 'Yahweh, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God' (Ex. 34:14)

Paul's distress is birthed from the conflict that arises with Jewish beliefs and Old Testament teaching about idols and images detracting attention from the one true God. The concern Paul felt 'aroused within him deep stirrings of jealousy for the name of God',¹⁸ his conviction for Jewish monotheism a strong motivator for mission.

Jealousy for the name of God no longer carries such motivational weight for mission. It is instead a deterrent. In our western, post-modern context where any claim to exclusive truth is shunned, Christians 'deny finality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and [thus] reject the very concept of evangelizing'.¹⁹ Reclaiming zeal and jealousy for the name of Jesus as an incentive is an increasingly challenging task.

V Strategic communication: 'a deliberative speech'²⁰

Scholars have praised Paul's address to the Athenians as strategically 'remarkable',²¹ providing this rationale:

- i. Paul chose Stoic principles and quoted Greek writers as a point of

14 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 212.

15 Stanley H., Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness: New Testament images of disciples in mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006), 137.

16 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 141.

17 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 290.

18 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 279.

19 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 279.

20 Lynn Allan Losie, 'Paul's Speech on the Areopagus: A Model for Cross-cultural Evangelism', in Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Derig (eds) *Mission in Acts: Ancient narratives in contemporary context* (New York: Orbis, 2004), 221-234, 226.

21 Howard Clark Kee, *The Theology of Acts* (London: SCM, 1990), 64-65.

- entry and to 'guarantee attention and a sympathetic hearing'.²² He addresses the philosophical understanding of Stoics and Epicureans.
- ii. He specifically attends to the listeners' claims by reassuring them that he was not introducing new deities.²³
 - iii. He cleverly used the claims against him to talk about the character of God. 'At the end of Paul's speech...the members of the council must have suddenly realized that they were no longer investigating Paul and his teaching...rather they are under investigation themselves.'²⁴
 - iv. His speech followed the established format with which the hearers would be familiar. He presented a 'deliberative speech, according to the conventional genres of the Greco-Roman rhetoric'.²⁵ This included the introduction (vv.22b-23a), thesis (v.23b), narrative of facts on which the argument is built (vv.24-29), argument (vv.30-31) and finally, conclusion (vv.32-34)
 - v. The content was equally acceptable as a common topic for this audience. His terms, convictions, arguments, formulations and cultural language were understood and acknowledged as valid.

In this address 'Paul is at his rhetorical best, drawing upon whatever per-

suasive tools are in his kit in order to engage the Athenian worldview and culture'.²⁶ Therefore, it is not a summary of Paul's sermons, but a speech for a specific context.²⁷

The intentionality of the address raises important lessons for mission today. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to sharing the gospel in different cultures. The message that is proclaimed, through word and deed, must be accessible and intelligible to the hearers. It needs to 'scratch where they itch' by responding to felt needs, addressing questions that are asked and dealing with relevant issues.

VI A comprehensive message: *grounded in theology*

It is clear from the content of the speech that Paul addresses the audience 'at the level of their basic worldview assumptions, creating a necessary context and foundation for proclaiming the risen Christ'.²⁸ He does not assume familiarity with the Old Testament and bases his arguments on general revelation and extra-scriptural evidence rather than Christological assertions.²⁹ Paul proclaims God as creator, sustainer, ruler, father and judge, thus grounding his Christology in theology.³⁰ This perspective is comprehensive, holistic and lays solid groundwork.

Perhaps contemporary people are

22 Kee, *Good News to the Ends of the Earth*, 65.

23 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 103.

24 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 168.

25 Losie, *Mission in Acts*, 226.

26 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 75.

27 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 103.

28 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 77.

29 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 134.

30 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 77.

uninterested in the gospel because they perceive it to be trivial, narrow and disconnected from their lives.³¹ They seek a gospel that integrates their worldview and life experiences. As Stott points out, 'We cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without creation, or salvation without judgment. Today's church needs a bigger gospel, the full gospel of Scripture.'³²

VII Embracing culture:

*'takes the audience seriously'*³³

The point of greatest discussion about this text is the way Paul began by affirming his audience and inducing their positive impression. He respectfully begins: 'Men of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious.' (v.22). They are addressed 'as religious people in a religious idiom about religious matters in anticipation of a religious response.'³⁴ This affirmation created an environment conducive to further dialogue.

Critiquing the lack of esteem displayed by some missionaries in Africa, Mbuvi writes: 'Once the other is dubbed a "savage", "heathen," "primitive," "of the devil," "godless," etc., then there is no space for dialogue.'³⁵ Paul did not overtly condemn or dis-

miss the audience, but 'wilfully engages the religious world and convictions of the other...and engages the deeper aspect of belief that was already in place'.³⁶ He meets them where they are.

The altar to the unknown God (v23) is used as a 'rhetorical bridge'³⁷ to the main subject of his address. He recognizes the reality of the Athenians' spiritual experience and uses the altar to highlight the potential of a more genuine relationship with God. Motivated by fear of offending an anonymous deity, the altar was most likely a safety precaution.

Legend tells that during a plague, Epimenides of Crete counselled the Athenians to send a flock of sheep on the Areopagus and erect altars to unnamed gods where the sheep stopped.³⁸ It is not known whether Paul knew of this story, but if he did, modern missiologists would recognize this as a redemptive analogy—a story embedded within a culture and used to demonstrate biblical truth.

Paul's approach is an example of contextualization: 'the dynamic and comprehensive process by which the gospel is incarnated within a concrete historical or cultural situation'.³⁹ It is the responsibility and privilege of Christians to exegete the context, discern what is appropriate, discover points of connection, take the spirituality of the people seriously and communicate with the least-possible number of barriers to understanding. A con-

31 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 290.

32 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 290.

33 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 183.

34 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 216.

35 Mbuvi, Andrew M., 'Missionary acts, things fall apart: Modelling mission in Acts 17:15-34 and a concern for dialogue in Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*', *Ex auditu* 23 (2007), 141.

36 Mbuvi, *Ex auditu*, 153.

37 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 133.

38 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 76.

39 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 19.

textual approach is not only important for sharing the gospel, but also for how the gospel is 'worked out'. It is the Christian's role to step back, pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance and empower the recipients to 'live out the gospel in obedience to Christ within their own cultures and circumstances'.⁴⁰ It is widely acknowledged that a contextual approach to mission is a respectful, honest and creative method of mission.

VIII Challenging culture: *'he walked on very thin ice'*⁴¹

Due to the fact that the gospel does not exist in one particular language group or cultural system,⁴² it will never exist neatly in any group without provoking change and transformation. Therefore as Flemming points out, 'The gospel, in some ways, is countercultural to every culture'.⁴³ While Paul acknowledges the Athenians' search for God, he implies that their search has been unsuccessful⁴⁴ or incomplete (v.23).

Someone motivated by a Spirit-led conviction about a jealous God could not say 'you have gods, I have a God...we're all believing different forms of the same thing'.⁴⁵ Instead, Paul 'undermines the deep logic of the

city's idolatry'⁴⁶ (v.29) by arguing that idols cannot produce offspring. He reveals the inconsistency of their idol worship by comparison with the character of God's relationship. Since Paul is forthright about the incongruence, we witness the reality that 'no smooth path is laid out over which thoroughly pagan religious sensibilities and the church's witness to Christ could travel side by side without serious tension'.⁴⁷

It is no surprise that the monotheistic message was not entirely palatable to the listeners' ears. In Athens, the temples made the city famous, sacrifices ensured goodwill of gods and participation in the cults led to higher social status.⁴⁸ Thus, some sneered and others were hesitant and cautious. Believing the resurrection of the dead and acknowledging the divine kingship of Jesus 'inevitably led to direct conflict of the early church with the pluralism and relativism of the Greco-Roman world'.⁴⁹

During the process of Kingdom transformation, the gospel offends, challenges and confronts. Despite the inevitable disruption it will cause, we must avoid 'watering down' the gospel to make it more palatable.⁵⁰ The task of mission in every culture is to carefully discern both the essential elements of the gospel that cannot be shaken, as

40 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 19.

41 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 180.

42 Gaventa, Beverly Roberts, 'You will be my witnesses: aspects of mission in the Acts of the Apostles', *Missiology* 10: (4 Oct. 1982), 413-425.

43 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 83.

44 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 339.

45 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 222.

46 Robinson, *Called to be Church*, 218.

47 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 137.

48 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 180.

49 David Peterson, 'The Worship of the New Community' in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (eds) *Witness to the Gospel: the theology of Acts*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 384.

50 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 81.

well as the unnecessary elements that can be negotiated or modified.

A common attitude hindering this process is fear of affirming aspects of another's faith and extreme caution not to 'go too far'. The terror of syncretism paralyzes people into not going far enough. Instead, people avoid interacting in 'spheres that engage the non-Christian mind'.⁵¹ For many, contextual mission is confronting and risky. Paul displayed 'an uncommon degree of courage to speak as he spoke',⁵² which encourages us to have courage, commitment and an unwavering reliance on the Holy Spirit to be our guide.

IX Culture informing theology

Paul's speech wonderfully portrays the dance between gospel and culture, and the care that needs to be taken in communicating effectively. It addresses the issue of how Christians use traditions of other cultures to provide insights for theology. For many, the issue is not 'how *do* they' but 'how *could* they!' Some people flatly refuse to engage in non-Christian cultures 'for fear of contamination'.⁵³ At the other extreme of the spectrum are those who ignore all meaningful distinctions between Christian and non-Christian culture. A healthy response is to acknowledge the tension and thoughtfully engage in the process with the assumption that much can be revealed about the character of God.

Underlying this issue is the assumption that God is present and revealing God's-self in all cultures. Bidden or not bidden, God is present. For Paul, Athens was a place where God already existed and was active. 'Paul made the bold claim to enlighten their ignorance...insisting thereby that special revelation must control and correct whatever general revelation seems to disclose'.⁵⁴ What does it mean for us to truly believe that there are no God-for-saken places on earth? Paul's precedent of quoting pagan poets, referring to pagan altars and encouraging the spiritual quest of the Athenians 'gives us warrant to do the same and indicates glimmerings of truth' found in non-Christian sources⁵⁵.

X Cutting ties or creating links

Unfortunately much unlearning needs to take place, particularly in colonized communities where mission efforts have included communicating the gospel plus a great deal of cultural baggage associated with western Christianity. Losie provides an example:

Asian theologians need to be liberated from overly Westernized forms of theology, especially when their own cultural traditions are in many ways more in tune with the ancient values of biblical cultures and thus can provide insights for the development of theology.⁵⁶

There is great hope of exploration

51 Fernando, *Acts*, 480.

52 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 284.

53 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 138.

54 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 285.

55 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 286.

56 Losie, *Mission in Acts*, 233.

as Christians rediscover traditions and practices that give life to their new-found faith. We all have much to learn.

This question of what a new believer 'does' with their past religious tradition poses an often stressful predicament. How does one discern what elements of their previous religion to discard and what aspects to maintain? This is particularly pertinent in cultures where religion is tightly meshed with cultural identity; thus, for example, it is said 'to be Thai is to be Buddhist' and 'to be Bengali is to be Muslim'. Many new believers will still identify themselves culturally as Buddhist or Muslim while being followers of Jesus. It is common that many would deny 'Christian' identity due to the negative and inaccurate cultural baggage the term represents.

A key question is: does conversion require denying all aspects of one religion and adopting all facets of another? Or does it refer to the process of adding and subtracting elements of knowledge and understanding as one discovers new insights? Many new believers do not perceive that they have 'transferred their worship from one god to another, but as having begun now to worship in truth the God they were previously trying to worship in ignorance, error or distortion.'⁵⁷

Paul is very clear in describing God as not abiding in temples made by human hands and we know he adheres to monotheism. What, therefore, is Paul asking of new believers? What aspects of Greek culture and thought

can they 'keep' and of what elements must they repent? How did the Holy Spirit lead Dionysius, Damaris and the other converts to make these decisions?

Insight is gained from Losie, who describes how Acts 17 provides comfort and insight to the Korean theology students in her classes.

They are a part of a culture that values antiquity, and they are relieved to find in this speech a precedent for honoring the traditions of their ancestors while at the same time being faithful in the proclamation of the gospel.⁵⁸

As followers of Jesus who read and reflect on Acts 17 for our times, we are invited to join in the dance between gospel and culture as we 'do' mission. Luke's contribution of this story in Acts beckons the church to 'engage the rest of humanity with the claims of the gospel'.⁵⁹ It also provides a model for mission that Christians have been imitating, wrestling with and dialoguing about for centuries. Acts 17 encourages Christians to trust the work of the Spirit in un-believing cultures, to put aside our arrogant claims to possess all the answers, and to enjoy the journey as we discover new insights from other cultures. 'Taking our lead from Paul, we must sensitively and critically engage a pluralistic world, while offering that world an alternative vision of reality'.⁶⁰

57 Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 285.

58 Losie, *Mission in Acts*, 233.

59 Kreslet, *Picturing Christian Witness*, 140.

60 Flemming, *Contextualisation*, 83.

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Book Reviews

ERT (2011) 35:2, 185-187

**The Future of Atheism: Alister
McGrath and Daniel Dennett in
Dialogue**

edited by Robert B. Stewart
Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press,
2008

ISBN: 978-0-8006-6314-8
Pb., pp. 212, index

*Reviewed by Glenn B. Siniscalchi, PhD
Candidate in Systematic Theology,
Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA*

Robert Stewart's most recent compilation of essays from the Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum is dedicated to discussing the future status of atheism. The basic intention of the increasingly popular

event in New Orleans is to create a venue in which evangelical Christians can dialogue with non-evangelicals or non-Christians about hotly contested issues related to religion or culture. The primary interlocutors of the 2007 forum were the British theologian Alister McGrath and atheist philosopher Daniel Dennett.

Along with Stewart's transcript of the original dialogue are new essays by some of America's most well-known Christian philosophers, theologians, and atheists: Paul Copan, William Lane Craig, Evan Fales, Hugh McCann, J.P. Moreland, Keith Parsons, Ted Peters, and Robert Stewart. Although the event is primarily designed for Evangelicals, all Catholic, Orthodox, and mainstream Protestants who appreciate the philosophical heritage

of the Christian tradition will benefit immensely from reading and absorbing the contents of this book. There is plenty of food for thought here, especially for those believers who seek to give rational justification for Christian faith.

Setting the stage for the rest of the book is Robert Stewart's opening essay, 'The Future of Atheism: An Introductory Appraisal'. Stewart argues that in order for us to make an informed judgment about the future of atheism—insofar as that is possible—we must have an understanding of the history of atheism as well as its influence in the present.

Unfortunately, questions such as 'Is atheism losing ground in the west?' and 'Is atheism becoming increasingly fashionable?' are barely touched upon, let alone addressed, in the dialogue by McGrath and Dennett or in any of the other essays. The book's contents will better serve the reader as an introduction to natural theology instead of informing her of the shape of atheism in the future.

The primary articles that follow Stewart's original framing of the debate are found in the exchange by McGrath and Dennett, Keith Parsons' 'Atheism: Twilight or Dawn?', and Ted Peters' 'The God Hypothesis in the Future of Atheism'. Dennett and McGrath primarily discuss the influence of religion and atheism in modernity. Of all the essays in the book, Parsons' article deserves the most careful attention by apologists. Responding to McGrath's interesting claims in his book, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (Doubleday, 2006), Parsons attempts to show that while philosophical atheism may be declining in the modern world, practical atheism may be on the rise. 'The real danger that science poses for theism,' he argues, 'is not that it can "disprove" God's existence, but that, as sci-

ence progresses, God seemingly becomes increasingly irrelevant and God's role in the universe is diminished'.

Peters makes an illuminating contribution to the interdisciplinary field of science and theology by showing that both disciplines share some things in common. Affirming the eschatological nature of Christianity, Peters argues that Christian theology is similar to scientific methodology in the sense that Christians have a provisional knowledge of God now and will receive further confirmation of this fact in the future.

The essay that epitomizes the emphasis on natural theology is William Lane Craig's 'In Defense of Theistic Arguments'. Craig provides up-to-date formulations of the classical arguments for the existence of God, using recent findings in physical cosmology to bolster his case. More to the point, he utilizes science to help establish the truth of minor premises in what are philosophical arguments for God. J.P. Moreland's essay, 'The Twilight of Scientific Naturalism: Responding to Thomas Nagel's Last Stand', is the second piece that is dedicated to natural theology. Here Moreland continues to defend his argument from consciousness to the existence of God in response to a recent challenge.

Although Paul Copan's 'God, Naturalism, and the Foundations of Morality' is probably his most rigorous and well-rounded moral argument for God's existence to date, it is unclear to me whether Copan is a divine command theorist or a natural lawyer. While the distinction between these two camps may seem moot and unimportant to some apologists, advocates of the natural law position are at a distinct advantage in reaching the atheist who merely appeals to human nature to determine what is objectively moral.

A perfect example of an atheistic appeal

to human nature is found in Evan Fales' essay, 'Despair, Optimism, and Rebellion'. Little does Fales seem to realize that the universal nature of humanity demands the existence of a Transcendent Personal Anchor to account for it. For in natural law thinking, objective moral norms are determined by the human person's ability to choose moral actions that correspond with their nature that is not only the same as every other person', but is a nature that is pointed toward an objective end. A universal human nature presupposes design, invoking a Designer. The new sciences of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology are not opposed to natural law thinking but are mutually reinforcing disciplines.

All in all, this volume is most welcome, given the increasing popularity of debates and dialogues between Christians and secular humanists. In spite of its minor glitches, those who seek to give reasons for Christian faith might well examine Stewart's newest book. Undoubtedly it will help believers and secularists to decide whether or not Christianity is a reasonable faith.

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Christian Ethics: A Very Short Introduction

D. Stephen Long

Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2010

ISBN 978-0-19-956886-4
Pb, pp135, bibliog., index

Reviewed by David Parker, Executive Editor, Evangelical Review of Theology

This new introduction to Christian Ethics by the Professor of Systematic Theology at Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin forms part of an enterprising

series called 'Very Short Introductions' (now with hundreds of titles) which cover the whole range of human knowledge in handy pocket-sized volumes. Despite this, the small print on the 135 seventeen by eleven centimetre pages yields more than forty thousand words of text, written in an extremely concise and economical style to present an astonishingly wide and comprehensive coverage of the subject. As well as the text there are ten well-chosen reproductions of classic paintings to illustrate key ideas in the exposition, although the black and white print renders them less than useful.

The author covers the foundations and history of both secular, Jewish and Christian Ethics in the first three chapters (with a lengthy introduction as well) including the sources and historical development as well as the modern and post-modern periods. The text skilfully provides clear background information as well as persuasive explanations of the various issues and perspectives, showing how Christian and general ethics have arisen and function.

A major consideration is how 'Christian' and 'ethics' can be brought together, given that so much of Christian history has included questionable events such as crusades, religious wars, conquests and the like. On the other hand, for many people, the author explains, 'ethics' is 'understood as a thoroughly human endeavour'. Nevertheless, it remains that 'the purpose of Christian ethics is to help us live well, and in so doing make God's name holy'. The treatment given acknowledges the difficulty involved but is confident that the task can be achieved. The basic grounding given in the first three chapters provides a clear historical and theoretical understanding while it is only in the final chapter that specific issues (sex, money and power) are discussed,

although without any concession to the simplistic way these topics are sometimes addressed. The excellent references and guides for further reading at the end give plenty of additional help.

The reader of this text will find it a welcome aid to understanding the nature and processes of Christian Ethics, which is 'the pursuit of God's goodness by people "on the way" to a city not built by human hands', understanding that 'it is not a precise science but the cultivation of practical wisdom'.

ERT (2011) 35:2, 188-189

Retrieving the Natural Law: A Return to Moral First Things

J. Daryl Charles

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans,
2008

ISBN: 978-0-8028-2594-0

Pb., x + 346, bibliog, index

*Reviewed by Glenn B. Siniscalchi, PhD
Candidate in Systematic Theology,
Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA*

'Without question,' says J. Daryl Charles, 'the last three decades have been witness to the breakup of any ethical consensus that heretofore may have existed in Western societies. Nowhere has this dissipation been more clearly on display than in the realm of bioethics' (page 3). Contending that all persons can discern and act in response to the law of morality that is 'written on the heart', Charles seeks to retrieve the tradition of natural law ethics for Christians to make greater headway into our post-consensus culture with the Christian message and world-view.

In a culture of radical pluralism, it is difficult for anyone to find agreement on pressing moral concerns. Even profes-

sional ethicists struggle with questions such as, 'What does it mean to be a human person?' Correlatively, 'what is a non-human?' 'Who has the right answer to these questions?' And, 'By what agreed upon criteria do we discover the answers to these questions?' The reasons for this decline in moral agreement are many: science says that morality is merely a matter of opinion; anthropologists tell us that morality is the result of cultural conditioning; philosophers contend that the ground of moral propositions is meaningless; and legal theorists add that moral decisions are simply the re-enactment of political power. And on it goes.

Charles points out that certain theological emphases have been partially to blame for the cultural malaise (pages 111-155).

Because Protestants have relied almost exclusively on biblical ethics, they have been ineffective in witnessing to traditional ethical positions in the public square. Secularists obviously do not share the same beginning point with these Christians (i.e., Scripture). The emphasis on existentialism and historicism has undermined the attempt to posit any universally binding principles of morality. Similarly, pietism has undercut the need to develop a robust public theology. The emphasis on personal conversion has come at the expense of 'loving your neighbour'. Other Protestants have been so pessimistic about human nature that this has short-circuited the need to promote a philosophical ethics.

By contrast, it would make sense for Christians to start with the foundational moral principles that everyone has been endowed with. Historically speaking, the church has a consistent tradition of natural law ethics. Hence: 'Where there is no affirmation of natural law, the Christian community finds itself in relative isolation and withdrawal from the culture to which

it has been called for redemptive purposes. And gone is any common ground on which Christians and non-Christians in a pluralistic society might engage in a meaningful ethical conversation or debate' (page 22).

When common points of reference have been set aside for the sake of certain theological emphases, the apologetic mandate loses its relevance and/or urgency. As Charles himself explains: 'This is not to say that Scripture has no place in our witness. It is only to illustrate that we must engage people where they are located in terms of their underlying worldview assumptions. Every unbeliever has a guiding set of presuppositions about ultimate reality that must be properly interpreted and then exposed for that unbeliever to come to Christian faith' (page 106).

Charles has provided an important work that needs to be seriously considered by everyone in the culture wars. Not only does he provide the reader with a crisp and cogent introduction to 'moral first things', he also demonstrates how these theoretical issues pertain to real-life debates, especially in regard to bio-medical ethics. This is precisely how *Retrieving the Natural Law* sets itself apart from so many published works on natural law and the virtues. For instance, he shows how natural law is relevant to social ethics and euthanasia. He addresses beginning-of-life, life-enhancement, and other end-of-life issues.

Always confident in the deliverances of right reason (*recta ratio*) under the influence of divine revelation, Charles has left the Christian community with plenty of food for thought. This book should be essential reading for every thinking believer who needs to discern the 'signs of the times' (Mt. 16:3) in order to provide an effective witness on behalf of the Kingdom.

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Kirchengeschichte Asiens (Asian Church History)

Klaus Wetzell

Nuremberg (Germany), VTR, revised edition 2010

ISBN 978-3-941750-25-8

Translated from the Indonesian edition

Kompedium Sejarah Gereja Asia
Malang (Indonesia), Gandum Mas,
2000

Pb, pp 680

Reviewed by Thomas Schirmacher, Bonn,
General Editor of *Evangelical Review of
Theology*

This history of the church in Asia is unique, as it grew out of teaching the subject at an Indonesian school of theology, was first printed in Indonesian and then translated into German. The author now teaches the same subject at the Academy for World Mission in Korntal, the German branch of Columbia International University, besides being a pastor and chair of German branch of WEC International. This is a second revised German version which is updated to the present time from the latest Indonesian edition.

It is a pity that the language barrier between English and the rest of the world means that English texts have a wide acceptance in the whole evangelical world, but influential books in other major languages often stay virtually unknown and without influence. Also, when one reads evangelical works published in the USA, one rarely finds other than English sources in the footnotes. Therefore the chance that this important work will make its way from Indonesian or German into the evangelical world community is not very great.

But it should, as the compendium is evangelical scholarship at its best. It is ecumenical, giving due place to all churches in all ages from the early church through the high times of Oriental churches in Asia, the times when the Catholic Church was the dominating Christian force in Asia, until the remarkable growth of the Protestant churches stemming from mission work. And yet it is evangelical, not only by highlighting evangelical mission history, but by carrying the conviction that mission and church history is under God's providence and God still uses history to teach his church. Thus the author asks at the end of each chapter, what the central spiritual questions were in that era and what we can learn from them for today.

Evangelical at its best is also the combination of mission history, church history and the history and comparison of Christian confessions and churches. The author is convinced that one should not separate them into different disciplines, but research and describe them together.

What overall picture do you get by reading the book? Here it is: The Christian church in Asia has increasingly moved into global Christianity's field of vision in recent decades. Unexpected revival movements can be as easily named here as can much acknowledged theological studies.

In the meantime, leading personalities in Asia significantly shape international Christian associations. Christianity in Asia has become an important branch of Jesus Christ's church around the world.

A particular focus of the book has to do with diverse aspects relating to Asian Protestant churches' paths to independence in various geographic regions. From the first indigenous church leaders and clerics all the way up to large churches fully under local leadership, the book traces how churches which originated

through missionary work took various routes to become churches that are fully at home in their domestic cultures. An additional focus of the book, which to my knowledge has not been found in any other Asian church history up to now, is the important number of changes for church history that occurred in Northern and Central Asia as well as in the Caucasus Mountain region at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s.

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My Brother's Keeper: Essays in honor of Ellis R. Brotzman

Edited by Thomas J. Marinello and H. H. Drake Williams III
Eugene, Oregon: WIFF & Stock, 2010

ISBN 13:978-1-60608-776-4
Pb., pp 287, List of contributors

Reviewed by Norman T. Barker, Brisbane, Australia

'My Brother's Keeper' is a collection of fifteen essays by scholars associated with the Tyndale Theological Seminary in The Netherlands. The title is an expression of their appreciation of Brotzman as a 'scholar with a pastor's heart'. The book has three sections, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral and Intercultural Studies. Its publication in 2010 also marks twenty five years in the life of the seminary.

As usual in such collections, the themes are very varied. The first essay is from the pen of Ellis Brotzman himself. In line with comparative studies of the Synoptic Gospels, Brotzman comments pertinently on three dimensions of Old Testament narrative relating to the crucial figure of King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-20, Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Chronicles 29-32). As with the

Synoptic gospels, he notes the freedom with which each writer or compiler chooses and marshals his information. 2 Chronicles, as we might expect, emphasizes Hezekiah's cultic interest, while Isaiah in unique fashion uses the historical interlude as a hinge between the first part of the book, harking back to unfaithful Ahaz, and the second part from chapter 40 onwards. Emphases and omissions fit in with each author/compiler's overall concern.

To pick up just a couple of other contributors. Appropriate to its setting in The Netherlands, Linda Gottschalk-Stuckrath deals with the Predestination and Free-Will controversy in her chapter on 'Arminius and Gomarus in Leiden'. W. Creighton Marlowe studies the meaning of the Hebrew word אֱמוּנָה, arguing that rather than 'truth' as objective fact the emphasis throughout is on God's faithful-

ness, or loyalty to his covenant promises (reflective of the Middle English *treuthe*). Does this link with Ronald T. Michener's study of the 'Kingdom of God and Postmodern Thought'? He suggests aspects of post-modernism that are helpful to evangelicals—not post-Christian, anti-Christian, or non-Christian. In contrast to modernism's emphasis on proof, evidences and objectivity, he states, 'Our faith is not merely based in the rational, the empirical, or the propositional; it is a faith that is immersed in relationship, in community, in the Spirit-filled narrative of God's revelation to and through his people.' I found his two pages on the way the Kingdom of God works, a description rather than a definition, some of the best I have read on this central thrust of the Gospels (pp. 144-145). Evangelicals will wish The Netherlands Tyndale well in its continued ministry.

Global Dictionary of Theology edited by William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove IL./Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, USA/InterVarsity Press, England: 2008) ISBN 978-1-84474-350-6. Hb., pp996, Indices.

In this large volume, the editors, recognizing the 'macroreformaton' (González) that is taking place as Christianity moves to the 'Global South', have aimed 'to provide a general overview of theological reflection and practice around the world in a conversation that does not privilege a single area of the world'. More than one hundred authors, many of them new voices, are marshalled, often co-writing the 250+ articles to enhance the dialogue and to give the local authenticity that is so necessary for any serious theological work today. The Dictionary does not contain any articles on individual theologians (although adequate references and index entries are given to permit follow-up) but concentrates on 'themes, country and area studies, movements and traditions'. Written from an evangelical and ecumenical perspective, some of the articles are quite lengthy, allowing detailed treatment of various traditional topics as well contextual matters, which include important contemporary issues such as terrorism and globalization. The overall result is a compendium that reflects the rich heritage of the Christian faith in creative dialogue with its vigorous developments in diverse areas of the world. As such, it surely merits attention as a vital reference work for readers of this journal.

Reviewed by David Parker, Executive Editor, *Evangelical Review of Theology*

Evangelical Internationalism: The American Christian Right and Global Human Rights by Gerlinde Groitl (Regensburger Studien zur Internationalen Politik. Vol. 4) (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac, 2007) ISBN 978-3-8300-2823-9. Pb., pp 200

'While evangelical Christians are usually identified with policies of unilateralism, militancy, and controversy only, the [American] Christian Right recently presented itself as a genuine force that fights against injustice and human rights abuses abroad' (p. 19). In her thesis the author attempts to clarify the reasons 'why evangelical Christians turned to and engage in global human rights advocacy' (p. 20). Ms. Groitl starts off by introducing the American Christian Right and its key organizations among which she sees the National Association of Evangelicals as 'of particular importance for the new foreign affair activism' (p. 27). She offers a short outline of human right issues of concern within American evangelicalism, which are identified as the fights against religious persecution, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS and poverty.

One of the reasons for this growing involvement in recent years is seen on a structural level: evangelicals found favourable political allies and opportunities, inside and outside the US Congress which led to 'direct legislative outcomes' (p. 113), something they did not see happening on key moral domestic issues before. What 'the Christian Right desperately needed at the time were political successes in order to prove its own political power and to reconcile the grassroots' (p. 84). These they found in a new focus on global human rights issues. Beyond this, a cultural dimension has also to be taken into account: a strong evangelical collective identity based on a heavy emphasis on mission and evangelism with religious freedom as a prerequisite draws evangelicals together for, and much more even demands an engagement with, global human rights issues.

In the final chapter the author concludes that 'Evangelical internationalism initially gave the Christian Right new vitality and sophistication. Meanwhile, it has developed its own dynamic and creates great tensions in the evangelical community' (p. 159). This is seen as far as the end of 2006. This books offer a well-informed, balanced and fair overview on the history, development and motifs of American evangelical involvement for global human rights for which the book deserves wide recognition.

Reviewed by Frank Hinkelmann, Austrian Evangelical Alliance, Petzenkirchen, Austria

The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis

A major achievement in Old Testament studies, this comprehensive five-volume dictionary is an invaluable study aid for all involved in the analysis and exposition of the Old Testament.

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A Sceptic's Guide to Atheism

Peter S. Williams

Atheism has become militant in the past few years with its own popular mass media evangelists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. In this readable book Christian apologist Peter S. Williams considers the arguments of 'the new atheists' and finds them wanting.

Williams explains the history of atheism then responds to the claims that:

- 'belief in God causes more harm than good'
- 'religion is about blind faith and science is the only way to know things'
- 'science can explain religion away'
- 'there is not enough evidence for God'
- 'the arguments for God's existence do not work'

Williams argues that belief in God is more intellectually plausible than atheism.

Peter S. Williams is a Christian apologist working for Damaris International in Southampton, UK.

978-1-84227-617-4 / 216 x 140mm / 312pp / £12.99

Spirituality without God

Buddhist Enlightenment and Christian Salvation

Keith Yandell & Harold Netland

In recent years Buddhism has attracted a fast-growing following in North America and Europe. In part, this is because Buddhism seems to offer peace and inner tranquillity, a profound spirituality and insight into ultimate reality yet without the need for belief in a God. To many spiritual seekers in the post-Christian West this 'spirituality without God' has strong appeal.

Whilst Buddhism has been a formative influence in the cultures of South and East Asia it is a relatively new arrival in the West and is little understood by Christians. This book has the twofold aim of introducing the diverse Buddhist traditions to Western readers and of offering a Christian engagement with the central truth-claims of Buddhism. This book is one of few attempts by Christians to offer a respectful and informed, but honest and robust critique of this important religion. It forms a helpful contribution to inter-faith understanding and discussions.

Harold A. Netland is Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Intercultural Studies at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, USA; **Keith E. Yandell** is Julius R. Wienberg Professor of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin, USA.

978-1-84227-642-6 / 229 x 152 mm / 312pp / £14.99

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