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Introduction: Thank You!

With this issue, I complete six years as executive editor of the *Evangelical Review of Theology*. When I started in 2018, I took over a little-noticed journal that seemed to have outlived its usefulness. About 150 institutions subscribed, but I had no evidence that anyone read it and I experienced great difficulty in finding enough suitable articles to fill 96 pages every three months.

In 2020, the end of our relationship with our previous publisher pushed us to become an open-access electronic journal. That enabled us to pursue a new vision of combining high-quality academic work with readability and relevance to the broader evangelical community. I could tell prospective contributors, ‘Write for *ERT* and your article will be available free to the whole world.’

This past August and September, I served as the World Evangelical Alliance’s interim communications director and gained access to analytic data on the WEA’s web pages for the first time. I was shocked to discover that the *ERT* web page is the fifth most frequently visited permanent page on the whole WEA website! It is exceeded only by the home page (obviously), the WEA statement of faith, and the pages on the WEA’s United Nations work and our leadership team. (And no, I don’t make daily visits to inflate the statistics.)

I hope we can continue to expand *ERT*’s readership and influence, not for our glory or personal benefit (my salary has doubled since 2018, but two times zero still equals zero) but for God’s. Two themes in this issue show why.

First, we highlight the WEA’s annual International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (which your church should recognize on November 5 or 12—see www.idop.org for details), with a message by WEA Ambassador for Religious Freedom Godfrey Yogarajah and an article on risk by experienced consultant Anna Hampton.

The next three articles feature Africa—both the increasing amount of good theological work occurring on that continent and ongoing challenges. Following a brief article on the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology, two essays, on the implications of Ephesians for ‘apostolic’ ministries and on the prosperity gospel, have a strongly African focus. We should all be working to strengthen the African church, because the future of evangelical Christianity is more likely to be guided by the Majority World, especially Africa, than by the West.

The remaining articles come from four Christian leaders of global prominence: Amanda Jackson, former WEA Women’s Commission director; Thomas K. Johnson, WEA senior theological advisor; Evert van de Poll, professor and leading figure in European evangelical theology; and Timoteo Gener, theologian and college president in the Philippines.

Letters to the editor, feedback (positive or negative), and suggestions are always welcome. I hope that *ERT* can retain your interest and inspire you for years to come.

Happy reading!

—Bruce Barron

Praying for the Persecuted: IDOP 2023 (www.idop.org)

Godfrey Yogarajah
WEA Ambassador for Religious Freedom

As we observe the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP) for 2023, our hearts are heavy with the rising tide of Christian persecution worldwide. More than 360 million Christians live in places where they face high levels of persecution, equating to one in seven Christians globally.

The statistics for Christian persecution are distressing. According to the World Watch List, 5,621 Christians were killed, over 2,100 churches attacked, and more than 4,500 Christians detained for their faith in 2022. These staggering numbers highlight the harsh reality that many believers endure daily: harassment, discrimination, wrongful imprisonment and even death for their devotion to Christ.

However, as we gather in prayer for our persecuted brethren, we find hope and strength in the Scriptures. Paul wrote, 'We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed' (2 Cor 4:8–9). Though persecution may strike believers down, it does not destroy their faith. The resilience and unwavering trust in God displayed by our persecuted brothers and sisters serve as a testament to the enduring power of Christ in their lives. Paul's message encourages us to pray with empathy and fervency, knowing that in Christ, the persecuted find the strength to stand firm and persevere despite the adversities they face. It strengthens our resolve to lift them up in prayer, seeking God's protection, comfort and strength, and affirming our unity as one body in Christ across the globe.

Through the IDOP, we bring global attention to the plight of our persecuted brothers and sisters. In places where they share our faith, they do not always share our freedoms, as 80 percent of religious persecution worldwide targets Christians. For over two decades, the IDOP has united millions of Christians in prayer for the persecuted. We recognize that their most urgent and basic need is for prayer. Hebrews 13:3 commands us to pray for those who are mistreated, understanding that their pain is our pain, as we are one in Christ (1 Cor 12:26).

This November, the World Evangelical Alliance calls on the global church to join the IDOP in an expression of solidarity. Let us lift up our persecuted brethren, praying that the Holy Spirit would empower them to stand firm in their faith, obedient to Christ even amidst hardships. Furthermore, let us commit to supporting those on the frontlines of persecution, as they advance God's Kingdom in the face of adversity. May our prayers and support be a source of strength to the persecuted, knowing that the global church stands united in solidarity, bound together by our shared faith in Jesus Christ!

Towards a Theology of Risk for the 21st Century

Anna E. Hampton

Risk is not always right! As threats against Christians intensify in many parts of the world, we must gain deeper understanding of when God is calling us into risky situations and be spiritually and emotionally prepared for the possible results. This article by an experienced risk consultant dispels common myths and offers a mature theological perspective.

Background

My journey towards understanding risk, fear and courage is one my husband and I have been on for almost 30 years. Neal first served in Albania, and when the government fell in 1997, he watched a mob tear through a brick wall with their bare hands in the ensuing chaos. Most expatriate workers were evacuated out of the country but returned quickly.

After we married, we moved to Afghanistan during the first Taliban government. We lived there for 10 years, through constant war and daily threats of kidnapping and murder. We experienced a large-scale robbery when 11 Afghan men held my husband, me and our two little ones at gunpoint and our house was ransacked.

Through the years, I also experienced sexual harassment on the street, stones and vegetables thrown at us, 20 of our friends and colleagues martyred in six years, being slandered in court by an Afghan, having our lives threatened, being slandered by other missionaries, horrible sicknesses, demonic oppression, and overwhelming poverty and death at our doorstep. We experienced constant grief and loss, and we continually planned randomized schedules to avoid surveillance or kidnapping.

As we carried on the work of providing aid and transformational development in a nation that had experienced war and foreign domination since 1973, we struggled with the questions of risk: when to stay, when to go, how to steward a large-scale non-governmental organization project, and how to protect the lives of almost 200 foreigners and Afghans connected to the project, as well as our children's and our own lives.

We then lived five years in Turkey, where we experienced direct threats by ISIS against our international fellowship, 18 bombings in 12 months, and a long, sleepless night hearing shooting and helicopters during the attempted coup in 2016.

Anna Hampton (DRS, Trinity Theological Seminary) is a global risk consultant with almost 30 years of ministry experience. She and her husband, Neal, serve with Barnabas International, providing pastoral support to gospel workers ministering in dangerous areas. Anna is the author of *Facing Danger: A Guide Through Risk and Facing Fear: The Journey to Mature Courage in Risk and Persecution*. Contact: <https://theologyofrisk.com/> or Instagram: @Theology.of.Risk.

Amidst all the injustice and oppression in these two countries that we learned to love, there were bright spots of light: locals choosing to follow Christ even at substantial risk of loss of community or even their lives; New Testament-style miracles among locals; deep friendships with locals and foreigners alike; and the supernatural sense of presence and peace surrounding us which comes only from our heavenly Father, giving us strength and grace to persevere one day at a time.

The risk problem

Although suffering and risk are related, risk raises different questions and requires different responses. All Christ-followers are called to identify with Christ through suffering with him, and all are called to be willing to risk their lives. While we are very likely to experience more suffering if we move further into risk, not all are called to risk for Christ physically. An answer to a question about suffering may address such issues as meaning and purpose; a risk question is much more specific, calling for risk assessment, risk management, and definite steps to address and manage fears. The primary risk question is 'Do I move further towards risk and danger, or do I retreat to safety?'

In one situation, a team leader wrote to me, explaining that their project had been attacked, and that extremists had killed one team member and taken another hostage. The team had evacuated to a neighbouring country to regroup but was preparing to return. The leader asked me, 'What should I tell the team? How do we evaluate the risk and address our fears?'

Evaluating our questions and answers reveals essential information. How we frame our questions can limit the type of answer we receive or want to receive. Conversely, we must evaluate the answer to see what question is being answered and if there is cognitive dissonance or coherence.

In our struggle to find answers to our risk questions, we began to see patterns of responses coming from the non-suffering church. There are at least three types of common but ineffective answers.

First, we sometimes received general answers to our risk questions. For example, we would often hear Romans 8:28: 'And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.' That is a true statement, but many bad things still happen to people when they risk their lives for Christ in dangerous contexts. The bad things certainly don't feel good when they happen to us, nor was this answer sufficiently specific to help us know what to do in uncertain and volatile circumstances. Although Romans 8:28 points to God's overarching purpose in suffering, general, conceptual answers do not answer risk questions, which are inherently situational and practical.

A second category of answer we received included pithy, simplistic statements that often sounded spiritual. I began to write down the most common ones we heard, and I have now compiled a list of 16 risk myths (discussed in the second edition of my book *Facing Danger*) that get in the way of seeing clearly in risk-related decision making. Risk myths may contain some partial truth, but the manner and timing of how they are stated make them unhelpful. Of the 16 risk myths, four are particularly pernicious and often repeated:

1. 'You are never safer than when in the centre of God's will.' While this statement has several theological problems, one of the major deficiencies is that 'safety' is not defined. People sharing this comment with us often seemed to assume that nothing terrible would happen to us and that we would be physically safe. However, many Christ-followers suffer physically for their obedience and pay a great price for their calling to share the good news of Jesus in unreached or hostile areas.

We have seen Christ-followers fall into a spiritual crisis when something bad happens to them and they think they must have missed God's will because of their experience. But many people have lost their lives while doing God's will (Heb 11:35–40). We often bring global workers back to Matthew 10:16–20, 34–39 to remind them of what Jesus said we would experience when we serve him: we will be among wolves, we could be flogged and arrested, we may experience a sword rather than peace, and we may lose our lives for Jesus' sake.

2. 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.' Sometimes church people are surprised to hear that this statement is not in the Bible. Nor has it always been true in history. Sometimes the church has been virtually wiped out in areas because of persecution. This myth is often used wrongly as a proof text or even a prescription for church growth. But the seed of the church is Christ's work on the cross and his resurrection, and he *may* use the blood of martyrs as one of many ways to plant his church. To use this statement in risk decision making improperly emphasizes the group (the church) over the individual (the martyr).

3. 'We aren't really risking.' This overly spiritualized statement is an echo of Docetism, a heresy that denies the reality of Christ's physical suffering on the cross, as well as the suffering Christ-followers experience when they face persecution. We risk much in our lives on earth, and to deny this is to deny the opportunity to offer our risks as voluntary acts of worship to him.

4. 'We've already counted the cost.' This statement implies that counting the cost is a one-time event. As we age and our life stage changes (from single to married, to family life, to empty-nesters, to grandparents and then into old age), there are always new costs to count. The opportunity to risk our lives for Christ requires continually discerning whether he is calling us to move forward in risk or flee danger. This requires a new assessment of what it will cost us to risk for him. When we take the time to sit, reflect and discern his calling to risk, the sacrifice we make is an act of worship, not a duty. It becomes an affirmation of a life lived continually before him, each moment of every day.

A third type of unhelpful answer is what I call a 'biblical anecdotal perspective'. The speaker picks a story or person from the Bible who they think best exemplifies what we should do. If they think we should stay in our risk situation, they might cite the example of Esther and state, 'You are there for such a time as this.' Others would answer that we should flee, like Paul, over the wall. Using Bible stories in this way was unsatisfactory and rarely confirmed by the Holy Spirit in our context, because people were glibly offering simplistic answers to complex risk questions without exploring the totality of the problems we were dealing with and without engaging in careful discernment together as to how the Holy Spirit might be leading us.

Scripture tells us that sometimes God's people obeyed and moved towards danger, and sometimes they obeyed and moved away from danger. The point of reading

the Bible is not to ask what Esther or Paul did, but how they heard from God what *he* wanted them to do. If the central character in Bible narratives is God and not me, then when discerning God's voice in risk, we should pay attention to those Bible stories that the Holy Spirit is prompting us to recall. We should examine those stories, determine how the people in the story discerned his leading, and then determine our course of action in consultation with leadership and trusted counsellors.

Biases are another obstacle that impacts how we think about risk, the types of questions we ask, and how we answer these risk questions. Psychologists have described over 150 human biases. In our two-day risk assessment and management (RAM) training, Neal and I focus on eight significant biases that can impact the Christ-follower ministering in dangerous contexts: confirmation bias, predictability bias, anchoring bias, halo effect, loss-aversion bias, authority bias, action bias and bandwagon bias. Confirmation bias—i.e. looking for information to confirm what we already think—is one of the most common. Some of these biases are more common to certain cultures than to others, but we all have biases. We can never fully eliminate them, but the point is to become aware of them and mitigate the blindness they may bring to risk decision making.

I also describe biases in risk in terms of risk aversion and risk tolerance. Someone who is biased towards risk taking may identify characters who withdrew from danger in the Bible, such as Paul fleeing over the wall at night in Damascus (Acts 9:23–31), but frame their decision as sin or disobedience. Conversely, someone who is risk-averse may focus on Bible stories that confirm their decision to avoid risk. We often observe an interesting reaction when Christ-followers realize that Jesus himself moved both towards and away from danger, depending on the situation.

Developing a theology of risk

The questions surrounding the challenge of developing and applying a theology of risk have been extremely personal and urgent for me as a Christ-follower, a mother, a wife, a global worker ministering in dangerous contexts, and a risk consultant to others facing danger.

In the secular world, risk is defined differently in medicine, aviation and the business sector. I use the term 'witness risk' for the risk related to gospel advancement. A witness is anyone who follows the way of Jesus Christ and bears witness to their relationship with him. 'Witness risk is the potential for loss *and* gain when following Christ.'¹

There is a tension in that little word 'and'. Are there loss *and* gain when risking for Christ? Can there be only loss or only gain? We don't want to miss the opportunity for sacred transformation that risking for Christ creates for us. When we take risks for Christ and experience extreme loss, significant persecution and even suffering, it might be only a loss if we allow bitterness, fear, complaining and conflict to characterize us. But when we allow the experience to transform our inner being, making us more like Christ, we have gained much through risking for him, even if there appears to be minimal tangible gain.

¹ Anna Hampton, *Facing Fear: The Journey to Mature Courage in Risk and Persecution* (Littleton, CO: WCP, 2023), xxii.

There is no Hebrew word for risk, but the New Testament uses three Greek words translated as 'risk'. Each Greek word is an idiom, so we must understand the meaning of these idioms to determine how the early church may have thought about risk. The three texts are Acts 15:25–26, Philippians 2:30, and Romans 16:4.

Acts 15:25–26 says, 'It seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have *risked* their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

In unity with the Holy Spirit's leading, the early church chose certain men for a specific task. Certain men were chosen to carry the letter from the church leaders in Jerusalem about practices of eating and circumcision to the Gentile church in Antioch. The risk word used here means 'to allow' or 'to give over to'. The verb tense used in Acts 15:26 means that Paul and Barnabas had actively chosen to deliver over their hearts and souls and remain in that position of danger. They weren't just setting themselves up for the possibility of difficulty, but they had decisively placed themselves in the centre of a difficult place, willing to die. They had chosen to live in a place where dreaded things could happen.

In Philippians 2:30, Paul says of Epaphroditus that 'he came close to death for the work of Christ, *risking* his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.' Fascinatingly, this word appears to have been coined by Paul from two words related to gambling, but it is not found in this form in any Greek lexicon before Paul's time.² The apostle emphasizes two primary ways in which Epaphroditus willingly hazarded his life for the sake of the gospel and God's people. First, sickness was no small thing in the ancient world. People greeted disease with terror and expected to die. Epaphroditus paid a dear price of weakened health through his ministry to Paul. Second, by visiting Paul, Epaphroditus, possibly a retired soldier of the Roman Empire, identified with a prisoner of the empire. This took no small measure of courage because it likely marked him for the rest of his life.

Later, in Philippians 4, Paul describes what Epaphroditus did and the sacrificial gifts sent with him as a fragrant offering, considered in the Levitical sacrificial system as an act of worship. This description should prompt us to ask ourselves, 'How is God leading me to gamble my life by moving into greater danger or out of danger as an act of worship of Him?'

Finally, in Romans 16:3–4, Paul states, 'Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life *risked* their necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.' Paul describes what Prisca and Aquila did for him as risking their lives. The verb tense means that they laid their necks on the line and kept them there—an ongoing action for an indeterminate time. What were they putting their necks down on? The same Greek word is used in only one other place in the New Testament, in 1 Timothy 4:6 to indicate sound faith and doctrine, based on the solid foundation of Christ's work on the cross.

The metaphorical stone on which Prisca and Aquila laid their necks is the foundation stone: God, our rock. They were not relying on their risk management plan, national passport or anything other than the one whom they could trust, Jesus

² See Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43 (Dallas: Word, 2004), 167–68.

Christ. They risked their lives, probably repeatedly over a long period of time, to spare Paul from danger.

What kind of courage was needed for them to lay their necks down and keep them there, possibly for years on end, on Paul's behalf? What kind of loyalty, endurance, stamina, wisdom and discernment was needed as they went about the task of hospitality, leading a church, teaching and baptizing, and probably raising a family and relocating at least twice?

These three words point to three major components of a theology of risk: choosing, worship and foundation. Just as the early church discerned with the Holy Spirit and chose certain men for an important task, whom has God selected for a specific risk today? As Epaphroditus' risk was seen as an act of worship, how is God inviting me to risk as an act of worship? Finally, what is the foundation for my risk? On what or whom am I basing my risk?

Framing our risk questions based on these components will lead to increased resilience in the face of danger. The two things that decrease resilience the most are isolation and resignation. If you know you have been called and chosen for a task, if the Lord has invited you to take on risk as worship, and if you are relying on God as your foundation, it's easier to face the challenges of risk, for you can know that you are not alone—God sees you and is with you and gives us agency in responding to the risk.

Applying a theology of risk to risk assessment and decision making

Part of a practical theology of risk is knowing how to discern God's leading into or out of danger. This includes all responsible risk assessment and management best practices. *Facing Danger* discusses eight steps of a thorough risk assessment; I will summarize some of these steps here.

Risk assessment asks two primary questions: (1) what could happen? (2) how does it impact us? Of course, a thorough assessment process will address many other questions and go into much more detail, but these are the fundamental questions of risk assessment. At a bare minimum, a Christ-follower should list key possible risks in a specific situation. Once potential risks have been recorded, determining their likely impact on us helps us see them in their proper size relative to each other. We often think that we don't have enough information to predict what is likely to happen or even a possibility if we cannot state something with certainty.³ However, risk assessment in any field is always uncertain because we must make educated guesses based on our knowledge of the environment and specific situations.

Risk decision making in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) situations is challenging even for the most experienced and trained person. Risk decisions that do not take our emotions into account are less effective and will achieve less buy-in from the team or community. The most effective risk decisions use logic, account for emotions, and invite input from men and women on the team facing the

3 Douglas W. Hubbard, *How to Measure Anything: Finding the Value of Intangibles in Business*, 3rd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2015), 109.

risk. After assessing the potential dangers involved, each person must decide if they are called (chosen) to face those risks or to retreat to a safer environment.

Besides the risk myths and biases, other things that get in the way of effective decision making include our fears, our cultural approach to crisis and problem solving, perceptions and framing of the risks, trust in our leaders, dangerous attitudes, mental mistakes commonly made under pressure, and more.

So how can we discern what God calls us to do in such complex situations? After a thorough risk assessment and analysis of what resources are at risk, we can ask questions on several levels: personal, family, team/project, locals, and partners in our destination country. Many questions can be explored at each of these levels, but here are some examples:

- Personal: Which decision leads me to increased faith in God, hope in his great power, and love for Him and others?
- Family: How are my spouse and children doing in the current risk environment?
- Team/project: If the risk happened, what would impact the team? What is the impact on the project if I leave? At what point is the project not sustainable?
- Locals: What is the impact on locals associated with us if we leave or if we stay?⁴
- Partners: What is the impact on them if I stay in the risk situation? Do I have adequate support from them should I need it? Are they supportive of my staying?

A few years ago, an experienced American couple came to Neal and me to ask for help in discerning what they should do in light of an active death threat⁵ against them in a North African location. In the next hour and a half, we helped them do a full risk assessment of the situation and determine what additional information they needed to finalize their decision. They also needed to find out how their adult son felt about them returning in view of the death threat. After a thorough process of gathering information, they evaluated all aspects of the danger and their calling, discussed the professional security input they had obtained and the current US embassy assessment, and compared their discernment of the Holy Spirit as individuals and as a couple. They decided that they felt led to return to their place of service. The threat was never acted upon, and they are still serving there as of this writing.

Applying a theology of risk to dangerous situations takes practice and thorough, wise and thoughtful analysis on multiple levels. Doing this has proven to increase godly endurance and resilience by God's people and has produced sacred transformation of lives and communities as his people persevere in hostile situations for the sake of the gospel. It also reduces the impact of trauma when they do experience

4 Two concise guides addressing these questions are 'Choosing to Stay' and 'Thresholds for Departure and Benchmarks for Return' by Concilium.us. See available pdfs at <https://worldlea.org/yourls/47401>.

5 Death threat analysis requires unique questions to distinguish specific from general threats of harm.

crisis and persecution and lessens the likelihood and impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A robust theology of risk with practical implementation helps God's people serve more effectively and calmly in gospel advancement in unreached and dangerous areas.

Conclusion

There are two ways of thinking about risk that should be avoided. One view is that 'risk is right' and the other is that 'courage is when we risk for Christ with no fear, always moving into more danger.' Both are dangerous thinking. What some Christ-followers call heroic risk may be plain recklessness and disobedience of our Lord's leading, so risk is not always right. In terms of courage and risk, courage is when we risk based on our calling, even when we have fear.

I advocate for greater emphasis on listening to what God wants us to do and obedience to him. Risk is situational, not conceptual, so we must apply a holistic theology of risk to each situation, do responsible risk assessment and management, discern what God is calling us to do, and then do it.

Why are the three elements of a theology of risk discussed above (choosing, worship and foundation) so critical? When crisis and persecution loom, the uncertainty and chaos of risk are often an unexpected surprise. People are overwhelmed and not sure what to do. I regularly point to the three elements as I guide Christ-followers to discern how God may want to work in and through them in risk contexts.

- **Choosing:** Christ-followers must clearly understand their calling to the specific risk situation. From the human perspective, we often start to discern who is chosen by first asking, 'Who is best prepared, well-suited, and competent among my team for navigating this risk environment well?' Instead, I suggest beginning with 'Who has God selected to journey with Him through danger, and how can I facilitate that journey?'
- **Worship:** We often start by asking, 'What resources are vulnerable because of the risk, and how can I preserve and protect them?' Instead, start with asking 'Am I moving into risk as an act of worship, as reflected in how I am managing myself, my relationships and my interactions, both with others and with God? What is God asking me to expose to loss for His name's sake sacrificially? How can I point our team towards a posture of worship?'
- **Foundation:** Finally, instead of asking, 'What contingencies and resources do I have in place to manage this risk well?' ask, 'How is God inviting my team and me to trust Him through this risk? Am I entering into risk with clarity about my reliance on God as my ultimate security and not for a sense of significance, adventure or false courage? Am I trusting in, clinging to and relying on Him as I move into or out of risk?'

Even when we have put comprehensive mitigation and crisis management plans in place, sometimes moving forward in risk looks irresponsible to the world and the church. Still, that may be what God is leading us to do. Risk assessment and management help us face actual reality. When we know he has called us to move into danger, thorough preparation allows us to see clearly what we are facing and go forward with greater endurance, resilience and tranquillity, come what may. At

other times, through careful discernment, we realize he is leading us to safety or a 'strategic vacation'. Both decisions are courageous when we obey God, no matter what others think.

When we obey the Holy Spirit's leading, whether it takes us into more significant risk and danger or out of hazardous situations, God is glorified and we are found faithful. He is worthy of whatever we experience out of obedience to him.

Introducing the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology

Wanjiku M. Kihuha and
Joshua Robert Barron

Is African Christianity theologically shallow? It is not, thanks in part to the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology. In this article, two ASET leaders describe the organization's vision and accomplishments and encourage theologians everywhere to engage with the exciting work emerging from Africa.

Christianity in Africa is often perceived as ‘a mile wide but an inch deep’,¹ as merely an expression of colonial imperialism or of ‘American religious hegemony’,² or as deeply infected by the prosperity gospel.³ Certainly, Christianity in Africa will always need reformation—*semper reformanda!*—but this is true everywhere, not just in Africa. In fact, depending upon the metrics chosen, one could argue that Christianity is now both wider and deeper in Africa than in North America or Western Europe.

Obviously, such facile analogies are inherently flawed; when we say ‘deep’, what are we measuring? Self-identification to surveyors, degree of allegiance to Christ, visible degree of Christian virtue in a community, or number of seminary graduates? In actuality, in both the West and in Africa, there are places where Christianity is either shallow or simply absent and other places of great depth. One area of

Wanjiku M. Kihuha (PhD, Yonsei University, South Korea) is a lecturer at Pan Africa Christian University in Nairobi, where she teaches on world Christianity, history and missions. Her research interests include the growth and expansion of Pentecostalism, gender relations within Pentecostal churches, contemporary trends in religion, and intercultural studies. She is also ASET's vice secretary. Email: wanjikumary339@gmail.com. **Joshua Robert Barron** (MDiv, Emmanuel Christian Seminary, USA) is a PhD candidate in World Christianity at Africa International University in Nairobi and a staff member at the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA). He has been active in theological and ministerial education in South Africa, the USA and Kenya, and he served as a consultant for the Bible Society of Kenya on its 2018 revised and corrected Maa Bible translation. Email: joshua.robert.barron@gmail.com.

1 See A. O. Balcomb, “‘A Hundred Miles Wide, But Only a Few Inches Deep!’? Sounding the Depth of Christian Faith in Africa”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 140 (July 2011): 20, 22.

2 Mark Shaw, ‘Robert Wuthnow and World Christianity: A Response to *Boundless Faith*’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 36, no. 4 (2012): 181.

3 E.g. Conrad Mbewe, ‘Prosperity Teaching Has Replaced True Gospel in Africa’, The Gospel Coalition, 25 June 2015, <https://worldidea.org/youurls/47402>; for a more balanced assessment of the prosperity gospel in Africa, see Joshua Robert Barron, ‘Is the Prosperity Gospel, Gospel? An Examination of the Prosperity and Productivity Gospels in African Christianity’, *Conspectus* 33, no. 1 (April 2022): 88–103, which is reprinted with minor revisions in this issue of the *Evangelical Review of Theology*.

encouragingly increasing depth is within African evangelical theology, and one useful metric is the growth of the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology (ASET).

This community of evangelicals engaged in theological scholarship for the African church and society is playing a vital role in promoting and strengthening the African church and advancing theological discourse worldwide. ASET was established in July 2010, with a mission to enhance African Christians' spiritual, social and intellectual growth by providing various educational and theological resources and a platform for African voices and perspectives to be heard. Since its inception, ASET has consistently strived to promote research and sustained theological reflection on critical issues facing Africa, by African Christians and those working within African contexts.⁴ ASET has helped to deepen the understanding of African Christianity and its place in the global theological discourse by fostering evangelical theological scholarship in Africa while addressing several areas, as discussed in this short essay.

The value of ASET in global theological discourse

Advancing evangelical African theology

ASET has emerged as a major advocate for the development of a theological framework that is firmly based in the African setting. It promotes contextual theology through its numerous publications and conferences, so as to better address the demands and difficulties experienced by African communities while also advancing and enhancing the theological conversation on a global scale. ASET accomplishes this by responding to the problems that the African church and society are confronting, from an evangelical standpoint and in a manner that is acceptable for African situations. ASET events and publications encourage adherence to biblical principles, business ethics, original and critical thought, and Christ-like humility. ASET's dedication to advancing African theology also empowers African theologians by giving them a stage on which to claim ownership.

Supporting cultural sensitivity and Pan-Africanism

ASET is vocal in promoting a spirit of Pan-Africanism that does theology while paying attention to African cultural settings. In addition to advocating the ideals of self-determination, social fairness and economic empowerment, it highlights the value of identifying and enjoying the rich diversity of African cultural history. In this regard, ASET plays a critical role in influencing the conversation surrounding Pan-Africanism by promoting cultural sensitivity and inclusivity in its activities and discussions. ASET is committed to fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness and is cognizant of the diversity and wealth of African civilizations.

Adding theological value to African philosophy

Africa has a rich theological heritage to draw upon, dating back to the patristic and even apostolic eras. ASET encourages its researchers, theologians and other

4 Gregory Crofford, 'What Is the Africa Society of Evangelical Theology?' Langham Partnership, 31 January 2018, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47403>.

members to recognize the importance of integrating theological thought into African philosophy, allowing for a more thorough understanding of African spirituality and worldview. The two fields are frequently treated in isolation, ignoring their interconnectedness. The rich and intricate beliefs, rituals and practices that have influenced the African continent for ages can be revealed through this integration, which offers a rare and profound opportunity to explore the depths of African spirituality and its connections with philosophical inquiry.

Providing a forum for African scholars to participate in global theological discourse

By enabling its scholars and theologians to draw on Africa's rich and diverse perspectives, influenced by its distinct historical, social and cultural contexts, ASET plays a crucial role in encouraging diversity in theological discussions around the world. ASET urges scholars and theologians to include African viewpoints in their theological discussions. Papers presented at ASET conferences speak to African contextual realities and are representative of African Christianity across the continent. Furthermore, the materials published in ASET volumes are accessible to scholars around the world, providing an opportunity for Christians in different regions of the globe to learn from each other. These many viewpoints expand our understanding of faith and spirituality by challenging and reshaping traditional Western theological frameworks. ASET supports a worldwide theological debate that is more intelligent, nuanced and reflective of the variety of human experiences thanks to promoting inclusion and comprehensiveness. The knowledge of faith and spirituality is enriched by these varied viewpoints, which contest and modify Western theological frameworks. The value of reciprocal learning between African theologians and their counterparts internationally is another way in which ASET emphasizes the significance of fostering global theological discourse.

ASET conferences and publications

Since 2011, ASET has hosted an annual theological conference. Starting with the fifth conference, held in Nairobi in 2015, the best papers presented have been included as chapters in the edited volumes of the ASET Series, published by Langham Global Library. Each book in the series 'explores what it means for Christianity to think and speak "African" ... not just in theory, but also by addressing some of the "nuts and bolts" issues of Christianity as it is experienced in Africa today.'⁵ Contributors represent African countries from Botswana to South Sudan, Kenya to Ghana, and Nigeria to South Africa, as well as Europe and North America. Eight volumes are currently available:

1. *Christianity and Suffering: African Perspectives* (2017)
2. *African Contextual Realities* (2018)
3. *Governance and Christian Higher Education in the African Context* (2019)
4. *God and Creation* (2019)
5. *Forgiveness, Peacemaking, and Reconciliation* (2020)

5 Rodney L. Reed, 'Preface', in *African Christian Realities*, ASET Series 2, ed. Rodney L. Reed (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018), xi–xii.

6. *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christology in Africa* (2021)
7. *The Holy Spirit in African Christianity* (2022)
8. *Salvation in African Christianity* (2023)

Each of these volumes deserves a place on the shelves of seminary libraries and in the personal collections of pastors and scholars. All eight remain in print and can be purchased from the bookseller of your choice or ordered directly from Langham Literature;⁶ they are also available on digital platforms such as Logos and Kindle. This year's conference was on the theme 'On This Rock I Will Build My Church: Ecclesiology in Africa'; chapters are currently being edited to appear as volume 9 in 2024.

ASET's 14th annual conference will be held at Pan Africa Christian University in Nairobi, Kenya on 8–9 March 2024. It will be a hybrid conference that can be attended either in person or online. The theme is 'The Mission of God and God's Church: Missiology in African Christianity' and the keynote speaker will be Malawian missiologist Harvey Kwiyani, the founding editor of *Missio Africanus: The Journal of African Missiology* and CEO of the UK-based Global Connections. ASET has received a record number of submissions for the 2024 conference.

Twenty-seven years ago, Andrew Walls astutely (and perhaps prophetically) observed, 'African Christianity must be seen as a component of contemporary *representative* Christianity, the standard Christianity of the present age, a demonstration model of its character. That is, we may need to look at Africa today, in order to understand Christianity itself.'⁷ This statement is now perhaps truer than ever. Within the ASET community, we are striving to be authentically Christian and authentically biblical. But this does not mean that African Christianity will look like 16th-century German Christianity, 19th-century British Christianity, or 20th-century American Christianity. We should rather remain authentically African. It should be well recognized by now that 'crossing cultural frontiers is not only a prerequisite for the spread of the Christian movement; it is also the means whereby the worldwide community of faith increasingly experiences the fullness of the Gospel.'⁸ ASET's annual conferences and the resulting books of the ASET Series represent one way in which African Christianity can help the worldwide community of Christian believers to increasingly experience the fulness of the gospel.

6 See https://langhamliterature.org/books?series_id=4329.

7 Andrew F. Walls, 'Introduction: African Christianity in the History of Religions', in *Christianity in Africa in the 1990s*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and Andrew Walls (Edinburgh: Centre for African Studies, 1996), 3.

8 Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 70. Hanciles is perhaps alluding to the title of Andrew F. Walls's book, *Crossing Cultural Frontiers: Studies in the History of World Christianity*, ed. Mark R. Gornik (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017).

The ‘Third Mention’ of Apostles and Prophets: Ephesians 4:11 in Light of 2:20 and 3:5

Jeffrey S. Krohn

Many Christian leaders (including Joseph Mattera in our May 2023 issue) see a role for apostles and prophets in the contemporary church. This article examines, with illustrative references to African interpreters and popular current practices, whether Paul’s references to ‘apostles and prophets’ in Ephesians support such an understanding.

This article considers the meaning of ‘apostles and prophets’ in the book of Ephesians. A careful reader of Ephesians 4:11 will recognize its contextual connection to and dependence upon both Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5. Accordingly, reading the words ‘apostles and prophets’ in Ephesians 4:11 should automatically bring to mind what Paul has already said about them in the previous passage. This connection, at times, has been neglected.

In fact, too often the literary context of Scripture is ignored. Given the epistolary nature of Ephesians, Paul is presenting a progressive argument. Concepts or words mentioned in earlier chapters help the reader understand their use in later chapters. I will argue that the ‘apostles and prophets’ of Ephesians 2 and 3 refer to *ancient, first-century, foundational* leaders, and that therefore, the ‘apostles and prophets’ of Ephesians 4:11 are first-century leaders intended to launch the beginning of the church. When this contextual reading is acknowledged alongside other historical and literary issues discussed below, it becomes difficult to read Ephesians 4:11 as a justification for modern-day apostleship.

One perspective: in defence of modern-day apostles

However, many voices defend the existence of modern-day apostles. In Zimbabwe, for example, Ezekiel Guti was a well-known apostle.¹ In Ethiopia, Apostle Tamrat Tarekegn is a familiar voice.² Peter Wagner writes of prophets and apostles in African Independent Churches, Chinese house churches, and numerous places in

Jeffrey S. Krohn (PhD, London School of Theology/Middlesex University, UK) is Professor of Biblical Studies/Systematic Theology at Evangelical Theological College, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He is the author of *Mormon Hermeneutics: Five Approaches to the Bible by the LDS Church* (2022) and a contributor to *The Holy Spirit in African Christianity* (Langham, 2022). Email: jeffreykrohn4@gmail.com.

1 Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 115.

2 See Tamrat Tarekegn’s website, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47405>.

Latin America.³ One positive result in Africa is that ‘the emergence of African prophets and apostles allowed for the proclamation of the equality of blacks and whites in faith and ministry (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11).’⁴

Specifically related to Ephesians 4:11, Asamoah-Gyadu sees ‘a direct connection between Jesus Christ’ and the gifts of apostle and prophet that are given to the modern-day church.⁵ The International Coalition of Apostolic Leaders argues that the modern-day apostolic gift is ‘essential for the healthy function of the Church and training of the Saints.’⁶ Similarly, Simbeck asserts that ‘there are no New Testament texts that explicitly support the cessation of the New Testament ministry of apostle.’⁷

Many of these authors would consider themselves part of the Pentecostal/charismatic movement. One of the most prominent recent developments in African Christianity is ‘the emergence and proliferation of Pentecostal/charismatic churches.’⁸ The same is true for other areas of the Global South, especially Central and South America. We celebrate that many of these churches ‘have systematically set out to evangelize the world.’⁹ Thus, we need to acknowledge the possibility that God is doing something new and significant, using a ‘new wineskin’.¹⁰ As a result of this growth and influence, some Pentecostal/charismatic views on modern-day apostleship have gained much traction, and they deserve to be studied and evaluated. Before we turn to Ephesians, however, we need to look at an important emphasis among Pentecostal/charismatic leaders.

‘Lived experience’ as a priority

A positive aspect of the Pentecostal/charismatic movement is its insistence on living out the Christian faith. We can be thankful to our brothers and sisters from this movement for nudging the rest of the body of Christ toward not only a more passionate, dynamic faith, but also an openness to the actions of the Holy Spirit. However, every perspective of modern-day believers (whether Pentecostal or not) must be tested rigorously against Scripture. Some Pentecostal/charismatic authors seem at times to have a less rigorous perspective on how their spiritual lives relate to the study of the Bible:

It seems to me that the two things, academic biblical study (whether pursued by liberal or conservative scholars makes little difference) and prophetic Christianity, operate at two very different levels. I see a kind of analogy with the world of drama, the academic being in some ways like the reviewer whose task is to

3 See C. Peter Wagner, *Apostles Today* (Minneapolis: Chosen, 2006), 8–9.

4 Adama Ouedraogo, ‘Prophets and Apostles’, in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi, Kenya; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1460.

5 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 72.

6 International Coalition of Apostolic Leaders, ‘Definitions’, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47406>.

7 Darrell J. Simbeck, *In Defense of Modern-Day Apostles* (ThM thesis, Regent University, 2021), iv.

8 Afe Adogame, ‘Introduction’, in *Who is Afraid of the Holy Ghost? Pentecostalism and Globalization in Africa and Beyond*, ed. Afe Adogame (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011), xvii.

9 Adogame, ‘Introduction’, xviii.

10 This is a common argument among Pentecostal/charismatic authors. See Mark W. Pfeifer, *Apostles Then and Now* (Fort Worth: ICAL, 2014), 74; Wagner, *Apostles Today*, 9, 138–39.

analyze, criticize, and comment on the play, the charismatic more like the producer or the performer on stage.¹¹

In addition, apostle Tamrat Tarekegn of Ethiopia quotes Matthew 16:17 and proclaims, 'God is only revealed to our spirits! People who try to understand God by their intellectual minds miss out on knowing and fully comprehending Him; because to know God in person you should have a divine revelation about His personality.'¹² As another author has observed, 'The central emphasis of Pentecostalism is not a teaching which must be believed or a proof which can be deduced and defended against all challenges, but a God who must be reckoned with in direct encounter. ... [We] ... utilize doctrine to describe and verbalize *lived experience*.'¹³

Furthermore, some Pentecostal/charismatic churches tend to seek 'fresh revelations' or a 'prophetic word'. Wagner claims that apostles and prophets can 'receive revelation from God' such that they can say, 'This is what the Spirit is saying to the churches right now.'¹⁴

These strong views will be indirectly addressed throughout our discussion. Nevertheless, some initial comments are necessary. Is the interpretation of Scripture and knowledge of God as anti-intellectual as these authors imply? Does 'academic Bible study' merely analyze and critique and thus fail to live out the message of the Bible? Do we really 'miss out' on knowing God if we only use our 'intellectual minds'?

The apostle Paul 'reasoned', 'explained' and 'proved' the gospel to those in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2, 3; cf. Acts 17:17; 18:4, 19; 19:8, 9; 20:7, 9; 24:25). He also wrote many challenging, deeply theological letters to churches—especially Romans and Galatians. These letters were doctrinal in nature, implying an expectation that his readers would understand intellectual matters. In another letter, he asked his readers six times in just one chapter, 'Do you not *know* ... ?' (see 1 Cor 6). He studied under Gamaliel and was 'thoroughly trained' (Acts 22:3). He did, in fact, focus on living out the Christian faith (see especially Eph 4–6; Rom 12–15; Gal 5), but also on knowledge of sound doctrine and the intellectual side of the faith (1 Cor 15:3; 2 Thess 2:15; 1 Tim 1:10; 6:3, 20; 2 Tim 1:14; 2:2; Tit 1:9; 2:1). In fact, the Holy Spirit works *with our mind* as we grow in our spiritual lives: 'The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace' (Rom 8:6). Many other verses challenge us to use our intellect in spiritual growth (e.g. Deut 6:5–9; Ps 119:27; Ecc 7:13; Mt 22:37–38; Rom 8:5; 12:2; 13:14; Eph 1:18; 4:22–24; Col 3:1–2, Jude 3–5).

Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest comment, 'The Spirit of truth guides people into truth through illumined, accountable uses of the mental capacities he gave the church.'¹⁵ They continue by lamenting that

11 John W. McKay, 'When the Veil Is Taken Away: The Impact of Prophetic Experience on Biblical Interpretation', in *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 59.

12 Tamrat Tarekegn, 'Divine Revelation', <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47407>.

13 Scott A. Ellington, 'Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture', in *Pentecostal Hermeneutics, A Reader*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 150, emphasis in original.

14 Wagner, *Apostles Today*, 24. I will address the issue of modern-day 'revelations' in a later section.

15 Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 39.

direct intuitions ('word of knowledge', 'prophecies', etc.) are often believed to constitute a higher 'spiritual knowledge' than knowledge that comes through a reasoned exegesis of Scripture. ... If there is to be growth in grace and knowledge, the entire person, including the intuitive abilities, must be brought into harmony with the truth of the Creator-God revealed in the historic Christ and the inspired Scriptures. ... The ultimate key to spirituality is not our own immediate experience, however sincere, life-transforming, and important that may be, but divinely revealed truth.¹⁶

In addition, it is not possible to separate our *knowledge* of God from our *lived experience* with God. We are not bifurcated into two 'halves', one intellectual and the other experiential. *Knowing* him will cause us to *live* a dynamic, fervent life with him. Our experience with the triune God is based on our knowledge of what he has revealed to us in his Word.

Another perspective: only ancient apostles

To interpret the Bible properly, we need to consider its literary context—especially books of the Bible in their entirety. It is helpful to ask ourselves, 'To what extent are we to honour *the ancient meaning* of the Bible before we begin our *modern-day application* of this ancient meaning?' To determine the ancient meaning of Ephesians 4:11 (and whether Paul was legitimizing modern-day apostles), we begin with a study of Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5.

Ancient apostles as the 'foundation': Ephesians 2:20

Ephesians 2:11–22 describes Jews and Gentiles together becoming God's 'household', which is 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets' (Eph 2:20). This is the first mention of 'apostles and prophets' in the book. A key word for our purposes is 'foundation'. Paul is using imagery that all readers are familiar with: 'household', 'built' and 'foundation'. How many times is a foundation laid or built? Only once. Paul is declaring that God's household has a foundation: the apostles and prophets.

Grammatically, Hoehner states that the 'most consistent' view is that *ton apostolōn kai prophetōn* ('the apostles and prophets') are genitives of apposition. Therefore, it is 'the foundation *consisting* of the apostles and prophets'.¹⁷ Other authors note that nearly all Protestant interpreters see these leaders as a first-century foundation.¹⁸ Gaffin explains:

In any construction project (ancient or modern), the foundation comes at the beginning and does not have to be relaid repeatedly. ... In terms of this dynamic model for the church, the apostles and prophets belong to the period of the

16 Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 39–40.

17 Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 398–99, emphasis added.

18 See R. Douglas Geivett and Holly Pivec, *A New Apostolic Reformation? A Biblical Response to a Worldwide Movement* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, Kindle edition, 2014), 46.

foundation. In other words, by the divine architect's design, the presence of apostles and prophets in the history of the church is temporary.¹⁹

God is building a living and growing structure with a first-century foundation that culminates in the construction of a 'holy temple' (Eph 2:21).²⁰

We see further proof that the apostles served a foundational role, given that the first believers 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching' (Acts 2:42). This teaching 'is the basis on which the church rests'.²¹ Their close association with Christ is the very reason why they constitute the foundation.²² A Pentecostal source seems to agree with this idea: 'These early leaders were *uniquely used* by the Lord to establish and undergird the temple of the Spirit with the teachings and practices they had learned from Christ.'²³

The tenses of the verbs in Ephesians 2 are important. The foundation (2:20) was 'having been built' (*epoikodomēthentes*). This verb is an aorist passive (past tense). Hoehner comments, 'It is fitting for the aorist to be used to indicate past time of the apostles and prophets as that first foundation.'²⁴ In contrast, the building on top of the foundation (2:22) is 'being built' (*sunoikodomeisthe*). This is in the present tense. We also note the two present-tense verbs in v. 21: the whole building 'is being joined together' and 'rises'.

Three counter-arguments to the apostles as first-century are given by Jon Ruthven. He writes that if Ephesians 2:20 means that the ancient apostles and prophets were 'the historical, initial foundation of the church', then that would also mean that Christ as the 'chief cornerstone' (Eph 2:20) is 'relegated to that era too'.²⁵ However, we see in numerous places that Christ is and always will be the cornerstone: Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10–11; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:4–8. It is clear in the New Testament that Christ is the ongoing centre and cornerstone of our entire belief system. No NT passage relegates Christ to the first century alone.

Ruthven also discusses the debate concerning the placement of the cornerstone, whether as part of the foundation or as a high 'capstone' at the top of a wall.²⁶ This would presumably deflect attention away from the idea of an ancient foundation. However, given vv. 21–22 and the image of a building situated above and resting on the foundation, it is difficult to believe that Christ is depicted as a high capstone. In

19 Richard B. Gaffin, 'A Cessationist View', in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 40.

20 See Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 169.

21 Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 137.

22 See A. Skevington Wood, 'Ephesians', in *Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 42; cf. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 153.

23 Michael L. Dusing, 'The New Testament Church', in *Systematic Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective*, ed. Stanley M. Horton (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 1994), 536–37, emphasis added.

24 Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 399. If the verb were in the present or even perfect tense, this would indicate a repeated action representing a continuing effect on the church throughout the centuries.

25 Ruthven, 'Apostleship', 218, in Benjamin G. McNair Scott, *Apostles Today* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), Kindle location 4487.

26 Jon Ruthven, 'The "Foundational Gifts" of Ephesians 2:20', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 10, no. 1 (April 2002): 39–40.

addition, the close contextual proximity of 'cornerstone' to 'foundation' in v. 20 would argue against a capstone idea.²⁷

Ruthven further argues that the foundation is a pattern to be replicated throughout time. He uses Peter's 'foundational confession' in Matthew 16:16 (that all believers could and should proclaim) as analogous to Ephesians 2:20.²⁸ However, although today's believers should indeed repeat Peter's confession and proclaim Christ to the world, Ruthven passes over too quickly the difference between first-century apostolic declarations and the evangelism carried out today. Thus, to summarize, the contextual meaning of Ephesians 2:20 is that the apostles and prophets consist of the foundation of the Christian faith, a foundation laid in the first century.

The focus on ancient apostles continues: Ephesians 3:5

Six verses after Ephesians 2:20, Paul describes the 'mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets' (Eph 3:4c–5). The ancient reality of the 'apostles and prophets' is even more apparent here, for Ephesians 3:5 gives us a clear historical referent. The apostles and the prophets *in the first century* received the radical, new truth that the Gentiles were joined with Israel. 'Paul divides history in half: the time before the coming of Jesus Christ and the time after his incarnation, death, and resurrection, when the full significance of his life and work on earth is revealed to God's chosen emissaries. The conjunction "as" (*hōs*) is critical to the interpretation of this passage.'²⁹ In other words, the joining of the Gentiles with Israel was 'not made known' previously as then it had 'been revealed' (Eph 3:5).

Furthermore, 'the New Testament itself divides the last days into apostolic and post-apostolic dimensions or periods. There is a foundation-laying period, marked by the ministry of the apostles and prophets, and there is a post-foundational, post-apostolic period in view (as Ephesians 2:20 implies).'³⁰ As for the title of 'holy apostles and prophets' (Eph 3:5), this may emphasize their uniqueness as set apart by God to receive this foundational revelation.³¹

This new phenomenon is described elsewhere: 1 Cor 2:6–16; Col 1:26–27; 2 Tim 1:9–11; Tit 1:2–3; Heb 1:1–2; 1 Pet 1:19–21. Romans 16:25–26 speaks of 'the mystery hidden for long ages past, *but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings* by the command of the eternal God' (emphasis added). Therefore,

the foundational revelation has come only to certain select individuals. 'Apostles' refers to the founding apostles who saw the risen Christ and were given insight about the significance of the gospel and the responsibility for handing it on. ... The prophets ... [were] those who had received revelation that helped frame how the gospel was to be understood and lived.³²

27 See Gaffin, 'Cessationist View', 40 n. 42. Cf. 1 Pet 2:4–8.

28 Ruthven, 'Foundational Gifts', 34–36.

29 Arnold, *Ephesians*, 189.

30 Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 229.

31 See Yusufu Turaki, 'Ephesians', in *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1456.

32 Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 161.

Thus, Ephesians 3:5 continues the thought from Ephesians 2:20: a radical, new reality has been established by God himself and handed over to Christ's first-century apostles and prophets. God entrusted them with this new teaching—the 'mystery ... that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus' (Eph 3:6).

The third mention of apostles and prophets: Ephesians 4:11

A letter writer, whether ancient or modern, generally assumes that the person receiving it will read the entire letter in one sitting and not leave parts of it for a later time. Therefore, a careful reader of the letter to the Ephesians will know exactly who Paul is talking about when he mentions 'apostles and prophets' a third time in Ephesians 4:11. Paul has not given any indication of changing the meaning of these words. By this we can conclude that the apostles and prophets of Ephesians 4:11 are *ancient, first-century* apostles and prophets—since that is the clear intent in Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5. As one author states, "'Apostles" and "prophets" have already been paired as providing a foundation for the Christian temple (Eph 2:20; 3:5).'³³

Ephesians 4:11 states, 'It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.' The aorist verb tense illustrates 'a one-time completed event'.³⁴ Does this mean that 'evangelists, pastors and teachers' are also first-century roles only—a 'one-time completed event'? No, precisely because *Paul has not mentioned them yet* in his letter. Evangelists, pastors and teachers, whether ancient or modern, are to use the foundational, first-century teaching of the apostles and prophets 'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up' (Eph 4:12).

Note the words to the church of Ephesus in the book of Revelation: 'To the angel of the church in Ephesus write ... I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you *have tested those who claim to be apostles* but are not, and have found them false' (Rev 2:1, 2, emphasis added). It seems that the church evaluated and tested the claims of certain leaders and decided that they were not a part of the foundational group that determined the parameters of sound doctrine.

In addition, Acts 12 mentions the death of James, the first of the twelve apostles to die (besides Judas). Since no new apostle was appointed, Lloyd-Jones sees this as evidence that 'the apostolate was a temporary office and that its continuance was never intended by the Lord.'³⁵ Dunbar summarizes:

The authority of Jesus for the early church was inseparable from the authority of the apostles. The word and work of Christ formed the 'canon' of the first believers. ... The apostles were the official channels of revelation appointed by Christ Himself (Mk 3:14) as His plenipotentiary witnesses (Acts 10:39–42; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:5–7). ... The apostles were pillars and foundation stones of the church (Mt

33 Wood, 'Ephesians', 58; cf. Raúl Caballero Yocou, *Comentario bíblico del continente nuevo: Efesios* (Miami, FL: Editorial Unilit, 1992), 167; John F. MacArthur, *Strange Fire* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 101.

34 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1122.

35 D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1 to 16* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 186–87.

16:18; Gal 2:9; Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14), and therefore their function was unique and restricted to the first apostolic generation. ... The authority of the tradition lay in its source; that is, it was 'from the Lord' (*apo tou kyriou*, 1 Cor 11:23).³⁶

Possible arguments against this interpretation

Simbeck argues, 'Why would Paul list all five ministries ... when he knew that, in a very short time, two of those ministries (i.e., apostles and prophets) would no longer be needed?'³⁷ No one claims, however, that they 'would no longer be needed'. On the contrary, they are vital and crucial, for they will always be the church's foundation. In the new heaven and the new earth, the New Jerusalem is described: 'The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb' (Rev 21:14; cf. Lk 11:49; Rev 18:20).

Another argument defends the exercise of the five gifts of v. 11 'until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ' (Eph 4:13, emphasis added). One author writes that 'the plain sense of Ephesians 4:11–13 is that the gift of apostle will continue to be given until the church reaches full maturity.'³⁸ Wagner bluntly states (regarding unity and maturity of the church), 'Who in their right mind can claim that we have arrived at that point? The only reasonable conclusion is that we are still in need of all five offices.'³⁹ In response, it appears that these authors are not taking into consideration the entire letter of Ephesians, nor the contextual meaning of 'apostles and prophets'. Paul has described the coming of Christ as an epochal, time-dividing, world-changing event. The full significance of what Christ did was hidden 'before' but was *then revealed* to Christ's apostles and prophets (Eph 3:5). The evangelists, pastors and teachers will use the teachings left by the apostles and prophets until we all reach unity in the faith, even 'attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ' (Eph 4:13).

Other authors argue that Christ gave the gifts in Ephesians 4:11 'post-ascension'. This would imply that the apostles of 4:11 are not the 12 apostles appointed by Jesus during his earthly ministry, but rather ones chosen after his ascension and even today.⁴⁰ However, we ought to question the common association of the ascension with Ephesians 4. Psalm 68 is the passage quoted in Eph 4:8–10, and it centres on God's victory over his enemies and then on his dwelling with his people. Thus, Ephesians 4 should be seen as illustrating the *exaltation* of Christ, not his ascension. Jones writes, 'The Lord Jesus Christ's "ascent" in Ephesians 4 is His exaltation to reign among and for His people.'⁴¹ The phrase 'he descended' (v. 10) would refer to his condescension and humiliation in the incarnation, whereas 'he ascended' (v. 9) would be 'theologically figurative for the infinite exaltation of the Lord Jesus

36 David G. Dunbar, 'The Biblical Canon', in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 320.

37 Simbeck, *Defense of Modern-Day Apostles*, 145.

38 Scott, *Apostles Today*, Kindle location 4511.

39 Wagner, *Apostles Today*, 13.

40 See Scott, *Apostles Today*, Kindle location 3886; cf. Pfeifer, *Apostles Then and Now*, 18.

41 Hywel Jones, 'Are There Apostles Today?' *Foundations* 13 (Autumn 1984): 23.

Christ'.⁴² This passage, then, is not referring to post-ascension apostles, but 'post-exaltation' apostles,⁴³ or the foundational apostles and prophets of Ephesians 2:20 and 3:5.

One final argument against the 'apostles as first-century only' centres on the mention of 'apostle' in 1 Cor 12:28. But Carson highlights that 'God has appointed *first of all* apostles', and that the use of 'first' would signify one of the foundational apostles and not a 'messenger' or a 'derivative apostle' (this term is explained below).⁴⁴ This passage actually corroborates my conclusion regarding Ephesians 4:11.

The biblical meaning of 'apostle'

Although there is wide-ranging debate over the issue, there seem to be five meanings of 'apostle' in the NT. First, Jesus is an 'apostle' (Heb 3:1). This surely emphasizes the basic meaning of 'apostle' as 'one who is sent'. There are more than 40 NT references to Jesus 'being sent'.⁴⁵

Second, the word denotes the Twelve plus Paul. Examples include the naming of the 12 disciples in Matthew 10:1–2, as well as in several places for Paul (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11). Revelation 21:14, quoted above, is additional evidence.

Third, there is another group of apostles: Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14); James, the half-brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19; 1 Cor 15:7); Silas (1 Thess 1:1; 2:6); those mentioned in 1 Cor 9:5; 'the apostles' of 1 Cor 15:7;⁴⁶ possibly 'those who were apostles before [Paul] was' (Gal 1:17); possibly Apollos (1 Cor 4:6, 9); and probably Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7). Would not this large group open the possibility for modern-day apostles? No, because of Paul's clear words in 1 Corinthians 15. He does not say, 'Then [Christ] appeared to me' (see the use of 'then' four times in 1 Cor 15:5–7) but 'Last of all he appeared to me' (v. 8), suggesting the conclusion of appearances to apostles. He even states, 'I am the least of the apostles' (1 Cor 15:9). He could identify himself as the least (and last) of the apostles because the number of apostles was complete.⁴⁷

We ought to be cautious adding further members to this group (also referred to as 'derivative apostles'). Some claim that Timothy should be included in this list. However, 'Paul's pattern of address in his letters always jealously guards the title "apostle" for himself never allowing it to be applied to Timothy'.⁴⁸ Note 1 Thessalonians 3:2: 'Timothy, who is our *brother* and *co-worker* in God's service ...'. If Paul

42 Jones, 'Are There Apostles', 23.

43 Jones, 'Are There Apostles', 24.

44 See D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 90, emphasis in original.

45 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 409. Additional references to Jesus 'being sent' appear in Mt 10:40; 15:24; Mk 9:37; Lk 4:18, 43; 9:48; 10:16; Jn 3:17, 34; 4:34 (over 30 additional times in John); Gal 4:4; 1 Jn 4:9, 10, 14.

46 The passage states that Christ appeared to 'the Twelve' (1 Cor 15:5) and 'then to all the apostles' (1 Cor 15:7), thus describing a group distinct from the Twelve.

47 See Paul W. Barnett, 'Apostle', in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 48.

48 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 910.

had wanted to designate Timothy as an apostle, then he would not have called him 'brother' and 'co-worker'.⁴⁹

The use of the verb *apostellō* is not an indication of the apostolate. For example, some authors claim that the Seventy of Luke 10 were also apostles.⁵⁰ On the contrary, they were called 'workers' (Lk 10:7) and 'lambs' (Lk 10:3). The verb *apostellō* is used in the passage (Lk 10:1, 3). However, this does not automatically mean that they were apostles, because this is simply a common verb. The Pharisees sent their 'disciples' (Mt 22:16); Jesus sent 'prophets and wise men and teachers' (Mt 23:34); the Son of Man will send 'his angels' (Mt 24:31); Herod sent an 'executioner' (Mk 6:27); Jesus sent a healed blind man home (Mk 8:26); and the centurion sent 'elders' to Jesus (Lk 7:3). In none of these examples were these people apostles, even though *apostellō* appears; they were simply sent. Many more examples could be given, for the verb is used 133 times in the NT.⁵¹

Fourth, one could argue that there is a group of apostles who were 'church planters or church-planting missionaries'.⁵² A possible reference to this group could be found in 1 Cor 9:1: 'Am I not an apostle? ... Are you not the result of my work in the Lord?' (see also 1 Cor 3:6; 4:15). Fee writes that there are 'modern counterparts [to apostles who] ... found and lead churches in unevangelized areas.'⁵³ Another possible passage is 2 Peter 3:2: 'I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles.' (Note that this passage speaks of apostles and prophets in the past tense.)

A fifth group of 'apostles' should be called 'messengers'. We see this example in Philippians 2:25; 2 Corinthians 8:23; and John 13:16. It is best not to think of these as 'apostles', for the context makes it clear that these references are not equivalent to the important use of the word in the first four groups mentioned. In fact, 'When Paul calls Titus, Epaphroditus and others "apostles of the churches" in 2 Cor 8:23 (cf. Phil. 2:25), he is clearly not using *apostolos* as a technical term for a member of the Christian apostolate but rather as "messenger"'.⁵⁴ Epaphroditus' role (Phil 2:25) was 'practical and not directly religious', and the two messengers of 2 Cor 8:23 were sent on 'a practical and financial mission'.⁵⁵ The individuals in this fifth group were simply messengers.

I would propose that groups two and three were the foundational apostles and do not exist today. It may be possible (though not advisable) that some leaders today

49 In contrast, Joseph Mattera calls Timothy and Titus 'two of [Paul's] apostolic protégés'. See Mattera, 'The Global Apostolic Movement and the Progress of the Gospel', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 47, no. 2 (May 2023): 148. However, Scripture nowhere uses this terminology. In addition, Paul did not connect the apostolate to either of these young pastors; instead, he continually focused on the proclamation of sound doctrine (see the section on 'The apostles' legacy' below).

50 Wagner, *Apostles Today*, 64; cf. Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, 67–69; Mattera, 'Global Apostolic Movement', 151.

51 James Strong, *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* (Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1995), #649.

52 See Arnold, *Ephesians*, 259.

53 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2014), 438–39.

54 Dietrich Müller, 'Apostle', in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 130.

55 Barnett, 'Apostle', 47.

could be labelled as apostles from the fourth or fifth group (but see the cautions below). Furthermore, some of those who claim to be modern-day apostles advocate for large ministerial extensions, thus invalidating any potential congruity with the fourth or fifth group. They invent new vocabulary to go with their claims: 'horizontal apostles', 'vertical apostles', 'apostolic networks' and 'apostolic covering'.⁵⁶ Some use Ephesians 4:11 to claim a level of spiritual authority that is unhealthy and possibly dangerous to the body of Christ. This issue cannot be reduced to a simple divergence over the meanings of words; it must be settled by a thorough study of Scripture and an investigation into its original meaning.

Paul himself emphasized the identification of apostles as servants, not superiors (2 Cor 4:5; cf. 1 Cor 3:5; 4:1; 9:19). As Ouedraogo has emphasized, 'Those who wish to announce the word of God should not seek titles of honor but should be servants of all (Mt 23:8–12).'⁵⁷

Another interpreter adds further words of caution: 'The word *apostle* could be used today only if it were stripped of its primary New Testament significance in referring to those who saw the risen Lord and/or helped map out the boundaries for belief ... [however,] the use of such a word today is pretentious and misleading.'⁵⁸ Grudem states similarly:

Though some may use the word *apostle* in English today to refer to very effective church planters or evangelists, doing so seems inappropriate and unhelpful, for it simply confuses people who read the New Testament and see the high authority that is attributed to the office of apostle there. ... If any in modern times want to take the title [of] apostle, they immediately raise the suspicion that they may be motivated by inappropriate pride and desires for self-exaltation, along with excessive ambition and a desire for much more authority in the church than any one person should rightfully have.⁵⁹

Historical context: no complete canon

Another historical issue is often neglected. First-century readers of Ephesians did not have a complete New Testament as we do. The apostles lived and ministered in the formative years of the church before the entire church possessed the writings that make up our New Testament.⁶⁰ We are at an advantage over first-century believers. We have the Holy Spirit indwelling us (as they did), but we also have the full revelation of God's Word. Therefore, we must be careful about assuming that our context is the same as theirs. We receive direction and instruction from God's word—which they could also do, but only to a limited degree.

56 See Pfeifer, *Apostles Then and Now*, 55, 56; Wagner, *Apostles Today*, 77, 78, 92; Mattera, 'Global Apostolic Movement', 148. Mattera offers, on pages 151–54, a helpful comparison of true and false apostolic leaders. Nonetheless, it would be more accurate and applicable to replace 'True Apostolic Leaders' with 'True Biblical Leaders'.

57 Ouedraogo, 'Prophets and Apostles', 1460.

58 Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 213.

59 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1122.

60 See Daniel Carro, José Tomás Poe, Rubén O. Zorzoli et al., *Comentario bíblico mundo hispano: Gálatas, Efesios, Filipenses, Colosenses, y Filemón* (El Paso, TX: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1993), 171.

The apostles' legacy: more apostles?

There is an even more important contextual issue: the literary context of later writings of the New Testament. What did the apostles leave us? Did they leave us more apostles? In their letters, did they write commands such as 'Don't forget to name more apostles when we die'?

To answer these questions, I will briefly explore God's 'chain of authority' in five parts, as chronologically given to his people.⁶¹ We begin with the Hebrew Scriptures. God's authority was mediated through these writings to his people (see Ex 5:1; Josh 24:2; Judg 6:7–8; 1 Sam 10:17–18; 2 Sam 7:4–5; Ps 1:1–3; Is 1:2, 18, 20).

The second part of the chain is Jesus: 'When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as *one who had authority*, and not as their teachers of the law' (Mt 7:28–29, emphasis added; cf. Mt 5:17; 8:1–9:38; Gal 3:24; Rom 10:4; Heb 1:1–2).

The third part of the chain was the apostles. Jesus gave them substantial authority: 'He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness' (Mt 10:1).

For our present purposes, the fourth part of the chain is the most important. We see no sign that the apostles handed over their authority to *other apostles*. There are numerous passages, however, that tell us exactly what they 'handed over': 1 Cor 11:23; 15:3; 2 Thess 2:15; 1 Tim 1:10, 15; 4:1, 6, 11, 16; 6:2, 3, 20, 21; 2 Tim 1:13, 14; 2:2; 3:14; 4:3; Tit 1:9; 2:1; Jude 3. In these passages, we note their legacy: their 'trustworthy message'; their 'sound doctrine'; 'the teachings'; 'the good deposit'; 'the faith'; 'the good teaching'. Regarding these teachings or sound doctrine, they also said the following: 'pass on (to others)'; 'entrust to (others)'; 'teach and insist on' them. The fourth part of the chain is thus God's authority in the body of teachings and sound doctrine communicated by the apostles.

Where do we find this body of teachings? In the NT, which makes the fifth part of the chain, the OT and NT combined as the complete Bible. Craig Keener cogently summarizes the fifth part of the chain:

The one revelation to which all Christians can look with assurance is the Bible; what we can be sure it means is what God meant when he inspired the original authors to communicate their original message. This is the one revelation all Christians agree on as the 'canon', or measuring-stick, for all other claims to revelation. Thus we need to do our best to properly understand it, preach it and teach it the way God gave it to us, in context.⁶²

In summary, the five-part chain of authority proceeds chronologically as follows: Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus, apostles, sound doctrine as established by the apostles, and the Bible as we know it today.

As we recognize and live out this chain of authority, the body of sound doctrine (the Bible) should be our focus—not whether a modern-day person is an apostle. When we focus on the 'apostles' teaching', seeking to know sound doctrine as part of our lived experience, we will live with passion and fervour, wholly dedicated to

61 Much of the following comes from Dunbar, 'Biblical Canon', 318–21.

62 Craig Keener, *The Bible in Its Context* (Mountlake Terrace, WA: Action International Ministries, 2013), 26.

God and to the gospel of Jesus Christ. 'Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord' (Rom 12:11).

Literary context: 'All anointed'

Another aspect of the literary/canonical context needs to be mentioned. According to the sound doctrine of the New Testament, all Christians are anointed. Ferguson explains that this anointing

results in [Christians] knowing the truth (1 Jn 2:20). They do not need anyone to teach them (1 Jn 2:27). Now, in Christ, all believers share in his anointing with the Spirit and have *knowledge of the Lord without human mediation*, in distinction from old covenant knowledge of God which was mediated through prophets, priests and kings.⁶³

This is an exciting reality. 'But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth' (1 Jn 2:20); 'As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him' (1 Jn 2:27).⁶⁴ However, lest we think that we don't need the Word of God, in the same passage John says, 'As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father' (1 Jn 2:24–25). What had they 'heard from the beginning'? The teaching of the apostles; their sound doctrine. We all have an anointing, and are called to 'works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up' (Eph 4:12).⁶⁵

Modern-day 'revelations': evaluation by the Word

One final issue before we conclude. How are we to receive 'prophetic words' or 'fresh revelations'? Does the sound doctrine of the apostles give us any direction? Yes, for 'all claims to hear God's voice must be evaluated (1 Cor 14:29; 1 Thess 5:20–21), and listening to someone else's claim can get us in trouble if we do not test it carefully (1 Kgs 13:18–22).'⁶⁶ In fact, 'In Jeremiah's day, some false prophets falsely claimed to be speaking what God was saying, but they were in fact speaking from their own imaginations (Jer 23:16).'⁶⁷ The content of sound doctrine found in the Bible becomes the standard by which we evaluate 'prophetic words' or 'fresh revelations'. In other words, as we said earlier, every perspective of modern-day believers must be tested rigorously against Scripture.

63 Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, 121, emphasis added.

64 See also 2 Cor 1:21–22: 'Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.'

65 In fact, while the foundation of the New Jerusalem is the 12 apostles (Rev 21:14), it is possible to say that 'the rest of us can be among its pillars (see Revelation 3:12).' See Michael L. Brown, Craig S. Keener and Craig Blomberg, *Not Afraid of the Antichrist: Why We Don't Believe in a Pre-Tribulational Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2019), 220.

66 Keener, *Bible in Its Context*, 26.

67 Keener, *Bible in Its Context*, 25.

Conclusion

We have seen that Ephesians 4:11, read in context, refers to the foundation-laying ministry of first-century apostles and prophets. Modern-day evangelists, pastors and teachers are to explain sound doctrine and proclaim the gospel that was revealed to these apostles and prophets.

Today we celebrate that all Christians are anointed, have access to the knowledge of God himself, and are called to keep their spiritual fervour and live out the sound doctrine of the apostles. All these conclusions were reached through intellectual, 'academic' study of the Bible. We praise God that he did not leave us alone—we have his Spirit and his Word. To him be the Glory. Amen.

Is the Prosperity Gospel the Gospel? The Prosperity and Productivity Gos- pels in African Christianity

Joshua Robert Barron

We know that some versions of the Prosperity Gospel are off the rails, as this article colourfully documents. But the article goes on to commend the positive impact of some African variants that often go unnoticed.

Prosperity preaching is prevalent throughout Africa, especially within neo-Pentecostal and neo-charismatic churches. This prosperity teaching is built on a particular interpretation of the biblical promises of abundant life in Christ. ‘I have come’, Jesus says, ‘so that they may have life, and may have it abundantly’ (John 10:10b NET). Most scholars read this as a reference ‘to eternal life, that is, the life of the coming age which ... begins in the present with a divine birth’¹. Eternal life is often understood as merely an eschatological promise—something that will only be realized when Christ returns—and hope for life after death.

Although ‘if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied’ (1 Cor 15:19 ESV), many keenly feel the obverse: if in Christ we have hope in the afterlife only and not also in the present life, we are truly in a pitiable position. However, abundant life in Christ does indeed begin in this life. Because Jesus is the source of life, the ‘life to the full’ which he promises in this verse ‘refers to everything from the kind of natural exuberance that is suggested by the wine at the Cana wedding to the suggestions in chaps. 5 and 6 [of John’s Gospel] of giving life to the dead’.² While ‘abundant life’ primarily refers to the quality of life in the Spirit and certainly includes spiritual blessings, it does not necessarily exclude material blessings.

Ordinary African Christians, and especially those whose life is full of economic uncertainty or health concerns, bring a particular set of questions to biblical texts. *If I will not give my child a snake for a fish or a stone for bread, then how much more must the Father delight to give good gifts to us his children? Does God desire to bless or to curse? Does God desire for us to die or to live?* Many African Pentecostals and

Joshua Robert Barron (MDiv, Emmanuel Christian Seminary, USA) is a PhD candidate in World Christianity at Africa International University in Nairobi and on the staff of the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA). An earlier version of this paper was published in *Conspectus: Journal of the South African Theological Seminary* 33, no. 1 (April 2022): 88–103. Email: joshua.robert.barron@gmail.com.

1 Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 811.

2 Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 369.

charismatics have responded to the questions asked by holistic African worldviews by developing a theology of deliverance. Believing that God can deliver from sin, from demonic influence, from the curses of witchcraft, and from various illnesses and injuries, they are moved to ask: cannot God also deliver from poverty? Or, conversely, 'If I can't trust God for my money, why would I trust him with my salvation?'³ Such questions have led many to embrace the Prosperity Gospel.

What is the Prosperity Gospel? The phrase 'abundant life', taken from John 10:10, is one of the cornerstones of Pentecostal theology in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ Building on this verse and OT promises of covenantal blessings, at its most simple the Prosperity Gospel 'portrays wealth and riches as a covenant and the fulfilment of the divine promise of God to his people'.⁵ The words of 2 Corinthians 8:9 are taken literally in a material sense: 'Jesus was rich but because of you he became poor, so that by his poverty, you may be rich.'⁶ The Prosperity Gospel proclaims that 'God wills spiritual and material prosperity for all believers' as an appropriation of 'the victory that Christ has won over sin, sickness, curses, poverty and setbacks in life'.⁷ Influenced by the 'health and wealth' television preachers of North America, the Prosperity Gospel teaches that 'a believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ, and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith'.⁸ Because 'whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully' (2 Cor 9:6 ESV), 'tithes and offerings become instruments of prosperity'⁹—especially, it seems, when given as a 'seed of faith' which serves to immediately enrich the prosperity preacher!

But is this teaching truly *gospel*? Or is it just another heresy? Most literature related to the Prosperity Gospel is by either wholehearted proponents (e.g. David Oyedepo of Nigeria and Nicholas Duncan-Williams of Ghana) or fierce opponents.¹⁰ Moving beyond the Scylla of salesmanship and the Charybdis of polemics, this essay examines whether, and to what degree, the Prosperity Gospel might be orthodox, heretical or heterodox. Building on years of teaching pastors and elders in Africa

3 So Mike Murdock (b. 1946), an American 'health and wealth' preacher whose prosperity teachings—especially his development of the 'seed giving' idea first popularized by Oral Roberts (1918–2009)—have been particularly influential among African Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Quoted in Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), 68.

4 Martina Prosén, 'Abundant Life—Holistic Soteriology as Motivation for Socio-Political Engagement: A Pentecostal and Missional Perspective', in *The Routledge Handbook of African Theology*, ed. Elias Kifon Bongmba (New York: Routledge, 2020), 307.

5 Eric Z. M. Gbote and Selaelo T. Kgatla, 'Prosperity Gospel: A Missiological Assessment', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 1.

6 Abiola Mbamalu, "'Prosperity a Part of the Atonement': An Interpretation of 2 Corinthians 8:9", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015): 3.

7 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Born of Water and the Spirit": Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in Africa', in *African Christianity: An African Story*, ed. Ogbu U. Kalu (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007), 349.

8 Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), 39.

9 Paul Gifford, 'Expecting Miracles: The Prosperity Gospel in Africa', *Christian Century* 124, no. 14 (2007): 20.

10 E.g. Ebenezer Obadare, "'Raising Righteous Billionaires": The Prosperity Gospel Reconsidered', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016): 1–8.

(2000–2001 in South Africa and 2007 to the present in Kenya) and ongoing discussions with fellow academics, missionaries and African church leaders, I have adopted a methodology which combines the approaches of integrative and narrative literature review.

I start by briefly reviewing the biblical teachings on wealth and possessions. Next, I review the literature on prosperity teachings in African Christian contexts and critiques of the Prosperity Gospel. As part of this examination, this essay also explores an offshoot from this form of Christianity known as the ‘Productivity Gospel’. This term refers to doctrine and praxis that have arisen from within Pentecostal and charismatic settings in the Global South, with a focus on their African expressions.¹¹ In conclusion, I propose that the Productivity Gospel may offer helpful correctives both to the excesses of prosperity teachings and praxis and also to the limited scope of Western theologies which lack Africa’s holistic worldviews.

The biblical voice on wealth and possessions

Scripture has much to say about wealth and possessions. While Scripture acknowledges the perpetual presence of poverty, ‘the Bible never views material poverty as good.’¹² Throughout the OT are repeated promises of material blessings and a motif that ‘the righteous prosper’, as Jonathan Bonk explains: ‘While it is true that some fail to prosper precisely because of their righteousness, there is a current of commonsense teaching in the Old Testament that promises tangible rewards to right-living people.’¹³ The Promised Land is repeatedly called ‘a land flowing with milk and honey.’ One of the names of God is *Yahweh-Yireh* (less accurately rendered ‘Jehovah Jireh’), Yahweh-who-provides. This covenant promise of Deuteronomy 15:4–5 is striking:

There must, then, be no poor among you. For Yahweh will grant you his blessing in the country which Yahweh your God is giving you to possess as your heritage, only if you pay careful attention to the voice of Yahweh your God, by keeping and practising all these commandments which I am enjoining on you today. (NJB)

But just a few sentences later, the covenant people are told, ‘Of course, there will never cease to be poor people in the land’ (15:11). Proverbs 30:7–9 offers a prayer for balance:

Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God. (ESV)

11 This Productivity Gospel should not be confused with what has been called the American gospel of productivity, which refers to the perceived superior efficiency of US manufacturing and industry in the years following World War II. See Nick Tiratsoo and Jim Tomlinson, ‘Exporting the “Gospel of Productivity”’: United States Technical Assistance and British Industry 1945–1960’, *Business History Review* 71, no. 1 (1997): 41–81.

12 Craig L. Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A Biblical Theology of Possessions* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 242.

13 Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem ... Revisited*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 101.

This prayer acknowledges that ‘material possessions are a good gift from God meant for his people to enjoy’ and yet ‘are simultaneously one of the primary means of turning human hearts away from God’.¹⁴ ‘Wealth and prosperity are inherently dangerous spiritually.’¹⁵

This ambivalence toward wealth continues in the NT. Jesus affirms that our Father will provide for our needs (Mt 6:25–33) but warns against trying to serve both God and the pursuit of wealth (v. 24). Of course, praying for provision for our material needs (Mt 6:11; Lk 11:3) is in no way to be equated with the greedy materialism of building ‘bigger barns’ to store hoarded wealth (Lk 12:16–21). Yet Paul could not have learned the secret of being content with plenty (Phil 4:12) if it were wrong to have plenty. Still, Paul has strong words for those who desire to be rich, castigating those who imagine ‘that godliness is a means of [material] gain’ as conceited and ignorant teachers of ‘a different gospel’ (1 Tim 6:3–5):

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. (1 Tim 6:6–11a ESV)

Material ‘wealth’, Paul proceeds to explain in 6:17, is ‘so uncertain’ and we should rather put our ‘hope in God’. While prosperity preachers focus on those made wealthy like Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon, Hebrews 11:36–39 commends those who by faith were imprisoned, murdered or destitute, and Hebrews 10:34 encourages those who had joyfully accepted the confiscation of their property. Whereas prosperity preachers treat the *kenosis* of Christ (Phil 2:5–8) as the source of physical riches, the NT does not present the ‘riches of salvation’ as either ‘exclusively or even chiefly material riches’.¹⁶

Historically, Christianity has continued this ambivalence regarding material wealth and its spiritual value. In public teaching, Christianity has typically renounced excessive wealth while seeking to promote lifestyles of modesty and sacrifice, though of course this has not always been carried out in practice.¹⁷ The message of the Prosperity Gospel, as I will demonstrate below, is not as nuanced as these biblical and historical voices. It primarily emphasizes passages about blessings.

14 Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 243–44.

15 Bonk, *Missions and Money*, 114.

16 Issiaka Coulibaly, ‘2 Corinthians’, in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2006), 1407.

17 Efe M. Ehioghae and Joseph A. Olanrewaju, ‘A Theological Evaluation of the Utopian Image of Prosperity Gospel and the African Dilemma’, *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 20, no. 8, ver. II (2015): 74; see also Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002) and Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

The prosperity message

What is the Prosperity Gospel emphasis in Christianity? The description given by Nigerian scholar Lawrence Nwankwo is worth citing at length. The central tenet of the Prosperity Gospel

is that God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Jesus. Every Christian should therefore share in Jesus' victory over sin, death, sickness and poverty. Thus, it is the will of God for people to prosper or succeed in every area of life. Prosperity here includes health, wealth, wholeness. Some elements are strikingly new.

First is the focus on the resurrection and not on the cross; on the fruits of the suffering and death of Jesus rather than on Jesus' call for all to take up their cross and follow him.

Second is that material poverty is included in what Jesus redeemed humanity from. This means that life of prosperity and comfort is the vocation and destiny of Christians thanks to the Jesus event.

This life of blessedness starts here on earth and reaches consummation in the afterlife. What is needed to activate the divine blessing is faith. This has to be combined with the religious practice of tithing which, according to a particular interpretation of Malachi 3:10–12, is what is needed so that God opens the flood-gates of heaven and rains down blessings. The blessings mentioned in the pericope of Malachi include protection against pestilence and increase in the fruitfulness of the land and the vine. This is translated into contemporary values such as cars, fat bank account, employment, fertility, visa to emigrate, and protection from witchcraft.¹⁸

Thus, if one has faith and demonstrates that faith through the practice of regular tithing (often accompanied by generous giving), the prosperity preachers proclaim, one is bound to prosper both spiritually and physically.

Does not Jesus tell us that he came that we might have life, and that in abundance? Jesus does not here refer to *bios*, mere biological life of the body, but *zoē*. And he did not say that he came that we might have this abundant life in the distant future after the judgement, or that abundant life is the reward for enduring suffering and hardship now. He rather speaks plainly in the present tense: we may have life even now, and that in abundance.

In addition to these biblical foundations, many proponents of the Prosperity Gospel consider prosperity to be part of the atonement.¹⁹ Paul Gifford explains that, in this understanding of the gospel, all human needs have been met by God through the redemptive passion and death of Jesus because Christ's victory over death is extended to believers in the here and now as victory—not only over sin but also over poverty and sickness.²⁰ Thus, in prosperity churches, the victory we gain from the blood of Christ is not so much over sin and death but rather over the physical world

18 Lawrence Nwankwo, 'Re-viewing the Prosperity Message in the Light of a Theology of Empowerment', paper presented at the 10th European Pentecostal Charismatic Research Association Conference (Leuven, Belgium, 2001), 1.

19 Mbamalu, 'Prosperity a Part of the Atonement', 1–8.

20 Gifford, *African Christianity*, 3.

in which we live.²¹ Within this hermeneutic, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1–14) is understood to refer not only to spiritual resurrection and the future resurrection from the dead but also 'to the resurrection of dead finances, businesses, marriages here and now'.²² This could not be more holistic, but the logic eventually becomes problematic: there is simply no room for theologies of suffering, poverty or martyrdom.

Theologians often discuss the tension between the *already* and the *not yet*. However, the Prosperity Gospel frequently insists that Christ's resurrection means that for believers 'all aspects of death that affect life on earth—poverty, sickness, barrenness, broken relationships'—have *already* been undone, resulting in victim-blaming and victim-shaming of any believer who is not experiencing all the marks of 'a victorious life' such as 'success, prosperity, health, and strong social ties'.²³ Any Christian who lacks such blessings, it is argued, clearly lacks faith or is immature or spiritually ignorant; once a Christian truly knows what blessings belong to her by faith, God is necessarily required and even forced to give those blessings. In the next section, I will examine the problems inherent in this theology.

Vhumani Magezi and Peter Manzanga, who show less sympathy to the Prosperity Gospel than Nwankwo, identify its tenets as faith (which 'is exercised in order to get things from God'); positive confession (on the grounds that 'the spoken word has the power to translate things into reality'); the seed-faith principle (sow big to reap big); and the deification of man as a 'little god'.²⁴ Each Christian is rightfully entitled to the blessings won by Christ; these blessings—both spiritual blessings and the material blessings of health and wealth—can be obtained by any believer who makes 'a positive confession of faith'.²⁵ This results in the 'name it and claim it' approach to material possessions, which promises 'unlimited levels of material prosperity' to those who 'have enough faith'.²⁶ Because God intends *shalom* for all Christians, including success, health and wealth, believers only need 'to claim these gifts as his or her right as a child of God because a true Christian will inevitably enjoy wealth and success'; the necessary corollary, of course, is that 'poverty and suffering'

21 Paul Gifford and Trad Nogueira-Godsey, 'The Protestant Ethic and African Pentecostalism: A Case Study', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 24, no. 1 (2011): 14.

22 Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 74.

23 Naomi Haynes, 'Affordances and Audiences: Finding the Difference Christianity Makes', *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 10 (2014): 359.

24 Vhumani Magezi and Peter Manzanga, 'Prosperity and Health Ministry as a Coping Mechanism in the Poverty and Suffering Context of Zimbabwe: A Pastoral Evaluation and Response', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 50, no. 1 (2016): 4–5. By 'deification', Magezi and Manzanga are not referring to the patristic (and biblical) teaching of *theosis*, but rather to deification in the worst possible sense, the exaltation of humans which results in their being equated with God. And yet this over-identification of believers with God obviously touches something deep within African cultures. I propose that a re-exploration of the patristic development of *theosis* (particularly in the Greek and Syriac traditions) within the context of African cultures could prove fruitful for African expressions of Christianity while potentially avoiding the pitfalls and excesses of the Prosperity Gospel.

25 Akoko Robert Mbe, 'From Asceticism to a Gospel of Prosperity: The Case of Full Gospel Mission Cameroon', *Journal for the Study of Religion* 17, no. 2 (2004): 47–48.

26 Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches*, 25, citing Bruce Barron, *The Health and Wealth Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987).

are assumed to 'indicate sin, or at least an inadequate faith or understanding of God's law'.²⁷

The 'seed of faith' is a material gift given to God—or to God's chosen representative, the soliciting prosperity teacher—as an act of 'sowing' which must result in a harvest, based on Luke 6:38. For evangelists of health and wealth, inviolable spiritual laws of cause and effect make prosperity inevitable as the reaping of bounty follows righteous sowing.²⁸ This teaching proclaims that 'faith leads to tithing, and tithing ignites prosperity. A gratified Almighty will respond by opening the windows of heaven, pouring out blessings so rich that believers will not have room to store them all.'²⁹ In orthodox forms of Christianity, spiritual transformation 'is mandatory for the born-again individuals'; the Prosperity Gospel promises that 'material prosperity' is 'the necessary aftermath' of that spiritual transformation.³⁰ Magezi and Manzanga note that it is difficult to distinguish between the praxis of Prosperity Gospel preachers who promote this seed faith principle and 'magicians'.³¹

According to Gifford, 'prosperity gospel preachers have moved beyond traditional Pentecostal practices of speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing to the belief that God will provide money, cars, houses, and even spouses in response to the believer's faith—if not immediately, then soon.'³² In short, the prosperity message

is taken to include prosperity in economic and material terms. It also involves prosperity in body, soul and spirit, which has to do with issues such as healing ability, peace of mind, victory over Satan, blessed children, protection and deliverance. According to the gospel, God has met all the needs of human beings in the suffering and death of Christ, and every Christian should now share the victory of Christ over sin, sickness and poverty.³³

Thus, the major motif of the Prosperity Gospel is success and (financial) victory. Nicholas Duncan-Williams is an influential Pentecostal church leader in Ghana. One of his books is entitled *You Are Destined to Succeed!* Gifford lists some of its teachings: 'God never planned for [us] or any of mankind to have sickness, fear, inferiority, defeat, or failure. ... The Word of God is a tree of life that will produce riches, honor, promotion and joy.' Quoting American health and wealth televangelist Casey Treat, Duncan-Williams equates the image of God in which we were created with success: 'God is the most successful Being in the universe. He's the Only One who's never had to cut back, lay people off, take out a loan or a lease, and has never rented anything. God is successful.'³⁴

27 Jane E. Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 41.

28 Paul Gifford, 'Ghana's Charismatic Churches', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24, no. 3 (1994): 243, 246.

29 Philip Jenkins, 'The Case for Prosperity', *Christian Century* 127, no. 24 (2010): 45.

30 Obadare, 'Raising Righteous Billionaires', 1.

31 Magezi and Manzanga, 'Prosperity and Health Ministry', 4.

32 Ehioghae and Olanrewaju, 'A Theological Evaluation', 69; citing Paul Gifford, "Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9, no. 3 (2006): 139–41.

33 Mbe, 'From Asceticism to a Gospel of Prosperity', 47.

34 Gifford, 'Ghana's Charismatic Churches', 243.

In Prosperity churches in Ghana, members sing songs with such lines as ‘The Lord can make your way prosperous’; ‘Jesus is the Winner Man’; and simply ‘I’m a winner.’³⁵ As with much of African Pentecostalism, the theme of Winners’ Chapel (aka Living Faith Church Worldwide) is ‘victorious living’³⁶ and ‘the stress is all on success’, with sermon titles like ‘Prosperity is my Identity’ and ‘Prosperity is my Heritage’.³⁷ According to Gifford, is not unusual to hear Bill Gates—a billionaire entrepreneur who epitomizes success—mentioned twice in a sermon and Jesus mentioned not at all as the focus of many growing Pentecostal congregations is material success and, as a result, a believer’s lack of success indicates that something must be wrong.³⁸

Critiques of the Prosperity Gospel

Prosperity theology chooses proof-texts so selectively that it often engages in eisegesis more than exegesis. It has little if any room for a theology of suffering and has nothing to say to those who are undergoing persecution or facing martyrdom. Ehioghare and Olanrewaju note that prosperity theology ‘emasculates the formation of Christian character. A serious implication of the prosperity gospel is that it leaves no room for brokenness and suffering.’³⁹ When confronted by the reality of persecution and martyrdom from the New Testament period up to today, proponents of the Prosperity Gospel have nothing to say. The Prosperity Gospel is not heard in areas like Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia where Christians have been subjected to severe persecution. In such areas, African believers have developed theologies that are strikingly different from the Prosperity Theology, such as the Dinka Theology of the Cross.⁴⁰

Precisely because the Prosperity Gospel has no room for a theology of poverty or suffering, prosperity theology’s eisegesis suggests that the material impoverishment or sickness of believers is proof of their lack of faith, thereby placing the burden of responsibility for suffering on the sufferers. In Zimbabwean Pentecostalism, the doctrine of the Spirit of Poverty explicitly correlates a believer’s poverty or wealth with her spiritual condition.⁴¹ If a believer is poor, it has nothing to do with structural injustice but can be due only to the demonic influences of his ancestral traditions and inherited spiritual bondage.⁴² As Ehioghare and Olanrewaju explain, the

prosperity gospel makes the poor to unnecessarily bear the weight of guilt. Though there is no inherent virtue in being poor it is equally wrong to regard

35 Gifford, ‘Ghana’s Charismatic Churches’, 263.

36 Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey, ‘The Protestant Ethic and African Pentecostalism’, 13, 20–21.

37 Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity*, 57.

38 Gifford, ‘Expecting Miracles’, 20.

39 Ehioghare and Olanrewaju, ‘A Theological Evaluation’, 74; cf. Edwin Zulu, “‘Fipelwa na baYa-weh’: A Critical Examination of Prosperity Theology in the Old Testament from a Zambian Perspective”, in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Herman Kroesbergen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 27.

40 See Marc R. Nikkel, ‘The Cross of Bor Dinka Christians: A Working Christology in Face of Displacement and Death’, *Studies in World Christianity* 1, no. 2 (1995): 160–85.

41 David Maxwell, “‘Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?’: Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Modernity in Zimbabwe”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28, no. 3 (1998): 357.

42 Maxwell, ‘Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?’ 358.

poverty as a reflection of one's spiritual status. There is a serious implication when God's blessings are reduced to material gain: those who are not rich are either guilty of sin or unbelief. In other words, if God's will is for everyone to be healthy and wealthy, then anyone who falls sick or remains poor is suffering from his own unbelief or disobedience. This places a terrible burden on the poor for it is unfair and unbiblical. It makes them victims of their unsavory circumstances.⁴³

Instead of a message of hope, this places the weight of blame on those who are poor or sick or oppressed.

The Prosperity Gospel's 'seed of faith' teaching can further be characterized as a 'God is my ATM' theology. Although blessing can certainly be found within giving, the transactional giving taught by the Prosperity Gospel serves to undermine the sovereignty and power of God. Moreover, in such transactional forms of giving, disciples of the Prosperity Gospel can treat God as a commercial partner who is contractually obligated to meet the demands 'of those who have fulfilled their side of a bargain' through the payment of tithes and by giving bigger offerings.⁴⁴ Prosperity Gospel church leaders have often (with good reason!) been accused of lining their pockets at the expense of poor church members who remain poor—including grass-roots-level pastors and evangelists.⁴⁵

In addition to being ill-equipped to deal with suffering and persecution, the Prosperity Gospel tends to neglect both the cross and also the vocation of Christians to provide a prophetic voice.⁴⁶ Moreover, it often lacks any emphasis on deliverance from sin.⁴⁷ The Prosperity Gospel has been criticized for these reasons from within African Pentecostalism. In West Africa, 'Bishop Joseph Ojo, national secretary of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria and pastor of Calvary Kingdom Church, says certain pastors have "invaded the pulpit but do not have the calling. Their god is their belly."' Ojo thinks that preaching prosperity is as distorted as preaching poverty. In East Africa, 'David Oginde, senior pastor of the 10,000-member Nairobi Pentecostal Church, believes he could triple his membership by promising wealth. "But if that is all I am teaching, then I have lost the message," he says. "The kingdom of God is built on the Cross, not on bread and butter."'"⁴⁸

The focus of the Prosperity Gospel yields a human-centred religion in which faith is but a tool to manipulate God into giving blessings and has much in common with the cargo cults of Melanesia; it is a syncretistic but Christocentric movement with an ATM theology 'in which prophets promised the arrival of unending

43 Ehioghae and Olanrewaju, 'A Theological Evaluation', 73–74.

44 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 99, 100.

45 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 367.

46 Nwankwo, 'Re-viewing the Prosperity Message', 2.

47 George O. Folarin, 'Contemporary State of the Prosperity Gospel in Nigeria', *Asia Journal of Theology* 21, no. 1 (2007): 74.

48 Joe Maxwell and Isaac Phiri, 'Gospel Riches: Africa's Rapid Embrace of Prosperity Pentecostalism Provokes Concern—and Hope', *Christianity Today* 51, no. 7 (2007): 28.

quantities of goods'.⁴⁹ Popular American prosperity preachers who are widely read or watched with approval in Africa seem utterly ignorant of biblical doctrine and offer a soteriology that is limited to 'name it and claim it'. Many proponents of the Prosperity Gospel run their congregations like a pyramid scheme, fleecing their flock. Rather than biblical exegesis, these preachers make their own experiences of success the focus and heart of their preaching.⁵⁰ David Oyedepo, the Nigerian founder and presiding bishop of Winners' Chapel, had as of 2011 an estimated net worth of US \$150 million, in a country whose average annual income that year was only \$1,875.⁵¹ Given that 'in the Old Testament, wealth and prosperity are most frequently tangible symbols of brutality, disobedience, and endemic injustice, rather than signs of God's blessing as a reward for personal or national righteousness',⁵² what are we to make of the obscene levels of wealth obtained by preachers like Kenneth Copeland and Oyedepo?

The Prosperity Gospel has been fairly criticized for serving to enrich its preachers from the sacrificial giving of members.⁵³ Seeing such abuse even at a vastly smaller scale, some African Christians suspicious of the Prosperity Gospel are reluctant to give to the church because, as several Kenyans have said to me, 'Why should I make the pastor's family fat?' In an even harsher indictment, 'Asonzeh Ukah identifies an instrumental usage of prosperity theology by founders of megachurches in order to "transform them into economic, financial and entrepreneurial empires which are completely controlled by their families."' What he basically describes is a Pentecostal kleptocracy.⁵⁴ Emmanuel Katongole notes that the abuses of the Prosperity Gospel 'and the pastors who extract tithes from their congregants in exchange for salvation' serve to 'keep many devout African Christians in poverty'.⁵⁵

According to Gifford, the Prosperity Gospel persuades its adherents to benefit from current economic systems instead of prophetically evaluating them and calling for remedies to social ills.⁵⁶ This is precisely because it often 'promotes materialism,

49 Nwankwo, 'Re-viewing the Prosperity Message', 2, 5; Thomas van den End and Jan S. Aritonang, '1800–2005: a National Overview', in *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, ed. Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 150.

50 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Anointing Through the Screen: Neo-Pentecostalism and Televised Christianity in Ghana', *Studies in World Christianity* 11, no. 1 (2005): 16.

51 Mfonobong Nsehe, 'The Five Richest Pastors in Nigeria', *Forbes*, 7 June 2011, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47408>; 'Adjusted Net National Income Per Capita (Current US\$)—Nigeria', World Bank, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/47409>.

52 Bonk, *Missions and Money*, 120.

53 Lovemore Togarasei, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts of Poverty: An Appraisal', *Exchange* 40, no. 4 (2011): 349.

54 Andreas Heuser, 'Charting African Prosperity Gospel Economies', *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2016): 5. Heuser cites Asonzeh Ukah, 'Prophets for Profit: Pentecostal Authority and Fiscal Accountability among Nigerian Churches in South Africa', in *Alternative Voices: A Plurality Approach for Religious Studies*, ed. Afe Adogame, Magnus Echter and Oliver Freiberger (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 134–59.

55 Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 24, citing Dayo Olopade, *The Bright Continent: Breaking Rules and Making Change in Modern Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 77. Katongole 'agree[s] with her assessment of the prosperity gospel' but rebukes the 'typical secularist slight' with which 'she dismisses religion from serious consideration'.

56 See Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 351.

sometimes of the kind that Jesus attacks in the Gospels', does not address difficult contextual realities, and can fail 'to provide pastoral care' for those who are struggling economically.⁵⁷ In addition to not providing a cogent theology of either poverty or suffering, it often 'blinds its proponents to the realities of sin as their desire for health-and-wealth prosperity becomes a consuming focus'.⁵⁸ Allan Boesak goes further, denouncing the 'prosperity gossellers' who exploit the poor, abusing their faith, 'with such scandalous skill' and asserting that 'the so-called prosperity gospel' actually 'usurps the language of the church' and 'overturn[s] the deepest meaning of the gospel (saying that wealth is a blessing no matter how it is created and accrued)'.⁵⁹

So is the Prosperity Gospel a heresy? With all these problems, some Christians are convinced that it is. Clearly, some prosperity preaching is full of heretical elements. But what is a heresy? It is not simply a false teaching, but a false teaching based upon a kernel of truth. That kernel (just like, for example, the Arian heresy in the fourth century) is nurtured until it grows out of proportion with other balancing truths. I have already briefly touched on the truths upon which the Prosperity Gospel is based. The flaws I have mentioned come primarily from the lack of balance. No doubt, some of its proponents, though not all, are indeed either heretics or wolves in sheep's clothing. But the polemical approach of asking 'in what ways is this wrong?' is not the most helpful.

The Prosperity Gospel as inculturation, or 'how is God at work?'

A more beneficial approach begins with two questions: (1) What cultural questions or problems does this theology or movement try to answer? (2) What is God doing through this movement? So what *is* God doing through the Prosperity Gospel? In the African context, it speaks into our holistic African worldview, allows believers an opportunity to escape from the culture of envy,⁶⁰ and thereby opens a door to hope.⁶¹

The Prosperity Gospel thrives in our holistic African worldview, which 'can be defined as a harmonious interaction between the physical and spiritual world ... between the visible and invisible worlds'.⁶² 'The majority of Africans live in a cosmos that is spiritually charged: a cosmos in which the physical and the spiritual

57 Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, 107.

58 Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 107.

59 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 63, 58–59.

60 I thank Mark Shaw, professor at the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, for this insight.

61 See the Lausanne Theology Working Group Statement on the Prosperity Gospel (2010), which notes, 'We recognize that Prosperity Teaching flourishes in contexts of terrible poverty; and that for many people it presents their only hope, in the face of constant frustration, the failure of politicians and NGOs, etc., for a better future, or even for a more bearable present', as quoted in Magezi and Manzanga, 'Prosperity and Health Ministry', 5.

62 Charles A. Anyanwu, *The Relevance of Pentecostalism to the African Society: A Socio-religious Analysis* (Owerri, Nigeria: Greenleaf Global Enterprises, 2004), 38–39.

intersect.⁶³ In this milieu, to become a Christian within the context of the Prosperity Gospel assumes that the believer will obtain 'power to overcome those forces that diminish life', resulting in a realized eschatology in which material well-being in the here and now is the pinnacle of salvation.⁶⁴ The Prosperity Gospel acknowledges the interplay between the spiritual and the material, thereby avoiding dualistic heresies (e.g. Gnosticism, Manichaeism, the false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular) and also correcting the excesses of European Enlightenment thinking.

Ngong notes that in an act of inculturation, 'African Christianity in general, and this neo-Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity in particular, have uncritically appropriated the salvific discourse of African Traditional Religions.'⁶⁵ In the worldview common to African traditional religions, realities in the material and spiritual worlds are interconnected, and activities in one influence events in the other.⁶⁶ African traditional religion values healing, prosperity and communication with the supernatural; in this context, prosperity preachers emphasize dreams in a way that resonates with African culture.⁶⁷ Maxwell observes that the prosperity form of Pentecostalism answers several questions that Zimbabwean culture is asking. It enables 'ordinary Zimbabweans to face painful social and economic transitions'; it provides them with 'a framework with which to respond to the pressures of modernisation'; for many 'it offers guidelines for material success' and hope for a better future and 'a chance to increase their livelihoods'; for those on the edge of poverty, the 'emphasis on renewing the family' and protection from substance abuse and sexual promiscuity keeps them from slipping into destitution.⁶⁸ Thus, the Prosperity Gospel can speak into African cultures, offering answers to the questions being asked in this context.

While 'traditional African values frown upon laziness',⁶⁹ many Africans are trapped within a culture of envy that functions as systemic oppression, preventing individuals from attempting to improve their lot. Why should you be better than anyone else? Who do you think you are? What are you, the *bwana kubwa* (KiSwahili for 'big man')? But the Prosperity Gospel allows believers to attribute their improving prosperity to God's blessing, which cannot be gainsaid. It thereby allows the opportunity to experience economic advancement. In and of themselves, traditional kinship and community ties are good, but such ties can often become tools of oppression. It can prove impossible to steward resources well, because as soon as you have gained something not immediately needed for today, someone will come and ask you for it, and you lack the cultural capacity to refuse, even when refusal is best

63 David Tonghou Ngong, 'Salvation and Materialism in African Theology', *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 1 (2009): 2.

64 Ngong, 'Salvation and Materialism', 13–14.

65 Ngong, 'Salvation and Materialism', 1.

66 Soothill, *Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power*, 10.

67 Maxwell and Phiri, 'Gospel Riches', 28.

68 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 359–70.

69 Isaac Boaheng, *Poverty, the Bible, and Africa: Contextual Foundations for Helping the Poor* (Carlisle, UK and Bukuru, Nigeria: HippoBooks, 2020), 40.

not only for your immediate family but for the community as a whole.⁷⁰ By replacing oppressive traditional kinship and community ties and their material obligations with those of just the nuclear family and the church, believers can be freed from community and familial financial demands (or even extortions), enabling them to achieve economic progress.⁷¹

The idea of moving from poverty to abundance and of being liberated from various forms of oppression—whether economic, social, or political—has given rise to theologies of empowerment, which have become an essential element of African Pentecostal theology because the gospel proclaims the possibility of restoration. Understood holistically, this includes both the physical and spiritual realms. Thus, as a believer experiences transformation, he or she experiences increasing shalom and abundance in both spiritual and physical terms.⁷² So, then, the Prosperity Gospel is founded at least in part on biblical orthodoxy: the positive biblical views of material blessings explored above, Jesus's statement that he came so that we might have abundant life, and a realized eschatology of Christus Victor theology (albeit with a greater focus on *already* than on *not yet*). Should followers of Jesus *not* live victoriously? Through a theology of empowerment, the Prosperity Gospel provides a way 'to overcome the existential pathos of impotence and pessimism'.⁷³

The Prosperity Gospel can speak into African cultures in a number of fruitful ways. Other cultural aspects of the Prosperity Gospel in Africa, however, are less healthy. Attempted manipulation of the object of worship—when God is treated like an ATM which is obligated to dispense cash whenever the right conditions are met—has much similarity with African traditional religions, where 'the ancestors are manipulated by speaking the right words, performing the right rituals and acting appropriately'.⁷⁴ It is easy for believers to unduly exalt prosperity-peddling pastors as African 'cultural history tells them to put stock in "Big Men"'.⁷⁵

The Productivity Gospel

Within the Prosperity Gospel, there have been at least two major streams. The first is a primarily orthodox theology which needs some correction or rebalancing in places. The second is heretical and deceitful practice, which has rightly been the subject of much critique. But a third stream has developed, the Productivity Gospel. At the risk of oversimplification, this can be described as the empowerment theology of the Prosperity Gospel combined with personal accountability and the Protestant work ethic. It has inherited Martin Luther's understanding of vocation, the sanctity

70 These points were repeated by several Maasai church elders at a seminar in Olepishet, Kenya in 2015. See also the discussion of how relational demands affect resource management in David E. Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters: Observations from Africa*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2015).

71 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 354. Kyama Mugambi, then assistant director of the Centre for World Christianity at Africa International University in Nairobi and editor of *Africa Theological Network Press*, and currently assistant professor of world Christianity at Yale Divinity School, shared several examples with me in a private conversation in September 2016.

72 Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Born of Water and the Spirit', 354–55.

73 Nwankwo, 'Re-viewing the Prosperity Message', 5.

74 Magezi and Manzanga, 'Prosperity and Health Ministry', 5.

75 Maxwell and Phiri, 'Gospel Riches', 27.

of work. Work hard and be rewarded.⁷⁶ This experience has been called 'redemptive uplift'.⁷⁷ Whereas the Protestant work ethic is built on the 'belief that work honors God', the Prosperity Gospel is built on the 'belief that God promises prosperity to the faithful'.⁷⁸ The Productivity Gospel combines these two themes and builds on the reality that frequently 'success ... comes with the stability of a Christian life' and can yield relative prosperity through ordinary sociological processes.⁷⁹

While it is generally recognized that 'prosperity theology contributes positively to the socioeconomic well-being of some of its followers and countries in general', one of its obvious faults is that it 'has the tendency of impoverishing some of its adherents, despite the economic progress it offers to others'.⁸⁰ Isaac Boaheng explains how this can happen:

As members are made to believe that their returns will be a hundred times their giving, some people give excessively. People may even go for bank loans to support their church with the hope of reaping a hundredfold. People may also donate just to prevent themselves from being considered as people of weak faith because their pastors teach that if one has faith and sows, they will receive material gain. Eventually when the expected return does not come, the person involved needs to pay the bank loan with other resources to be gathered. This may lead to falling into debt and bankruptcy. Furthermore, prosperity theology widens the economic gap between poor church members and their spiritual leader. We find these pastors having so much wealth in stock in churches where some members cannot afford three square meals a day.⁸¹

Preachers of the Productivity Gospel, however, have shown greater concern for their congregants. Viateur Habarurema lists three positive contributions of the Prosperity Gospel: 'a genuine quest for the fullness of life promised by the Scriptures', an 'audacity to address real-life problems [and the] existential needs of people by drawing upon their traditions and biblical resources', and 'a reverential attitude to the

76 Although they use different terminology, see also Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, 'Born in the Image of God: Democracy and Upward Mobility', in their *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 160–83, which applies Max Weber's Protestant work ethic theses to this form of the Prosperity Gospel. See also Tomas Sundnes Drønen, 'Weber, Prosperity and the Protestant Ethic: Some Reflections on Pentecostalism and Economic Development', *Svensk Missionstidskrift* (Swedish Missiological Themes) 100, no. 3 (2012): 321–35.

77 See Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 354.

78 Mitchell J. Neubert, Kevin D. Dougherty, Jerry Z. Park and Jenna Griebel, 'Beliefs about Faith and Work: Development and Validation of Honoring God and Prosperity Gospel Scales', *Review of Religious Research* 56, no. 1 (2014): 141.

79 Wanjiru M. Gitau, *Megachurch Christianity Reconsidered: Millennials and Social Change in African Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 149.

80 Boaheng, *Poverty, the Bible, and Africa*, 120, citing Basilus M. Kasera, 'The Biblical and Theological Examination of Prosperity Theology and Its Impact among the Poor in Namibia' (MTh thesis, South African Theological Seminary, 2012), 119, <https://worldidea.org/yoururls/47410>.

81 Boaheng, *Poverty, the Bible, and Africa*, 120, citing J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Sighs and Signs of the Spirit: Ghanaian Perspectives on Pentecostalism and Renewal in Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 2015), 163–76.

Bible as God's Word'.⁸² These first two contributions serve to gain a hearing for the gospel. Many economically challenged Africans have found that 'being a member of a church offers life-saving access to social networks of mutual aid and support, which teach essential survival skills [while] peer pressure helps believers avoid the snares of substance abuse'. This is perhaps especially true for rural Africans who have moved to urban settings.⁸³ According to my research, the offering of practical solutions to existential needs is fully realized in the context of the Productivity Gospel rather than in the flashy panhandlers of prosperity who have grown fat on their flock.

For the Productivity Gospel, success is not achieved simply by following laws nor by tithing legalistically, but through 'self-confidence, pride, determination, motivation, discipline, application, courage—and by skills and techniques' that the pastors take care to impart.⁸⁴ It has been observed that 'the prosperity gospel in an African context' offers 'a cogent formula for economic development'.⁸⁵ Moreover, 'it is apparent that the prosperity gospels also include teachings on spiritual prosperity, the prosperity of the individual so that he or she becomes a blessing to others, and the prosperity of the church in order to engage in the business of the kingdom'.⁸⁶ These observations, however, upon closer examination are more aptly applied specifically to the Productivity Gospel.

Pastors Ojo and Oginde, whose criticisms of the Prosperity Gospel I cited above, both recognize that many prosperity teachers do good—they 'inspire members to aim high, work hard, and avoid vices'—and that prosperity ministries engage in 'humanitarian work such as building schools and colleges, supplying food and medicine to the poor, and supporting HIV/AIDS prevention programs'.⁸⁷ The doctrines of a balanced and responsible Prosperity Gospel free of abuses, which I distinguish as the Productivity Gospel (though I retain the usage of others in the following quotations), 'have engendered social mobility for some' and provide for others 'a code of conduct which guards them from falling into poverty and destitution. For all they provide a pattern for coming to terms with, and benefitting from, modernities' dominant values and institutions'.⁸⁸ The improved morality of Pentecostal men makes them better providers and protectors. Instead of spending their money on addictive substances and on other women, they now use those funds 'for purchase of consumer goods, education, and savings'.⁸⁹ Because the believers dress sharply and are hardworking and trustworthy, they have more and better opportunities for employment. In addition, within the Pentecostal churches, believers 'also benefit from the material

82 Viateur Habarurema, *Christian Generosity According to 2 Corinthians 8–9: Its Exegesis, Reception, and Interpretation Today in Dialogue with the Prosperity Gospel in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2017), 260, 263, 266.

83 Jenkins, 'The Case for Prosperity', 45.

84 Gifford, 'Ghana's Charismatic Churches', 246.

85 Obadare, 'Raising Righteous Billionaires', 2.

86 Ben-Willie K. Golo, 'Africa's Poverty and its Neo-Pentecostal "Liberators": An Ecotheological Assessment of Africa's Prosperity Gospellers', *Pneuma* 35, no. 3 (2013): 375.

87 Maxwell and Phiri, 'Gospel Riches', 28.

88 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 351.

89 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 353.

support of the church community'.⁹⁰ Much like the church of the first three centuries, 'pentecostals ... care for the sick, orphans and widows, and often provide housing in an urban environment where it is scarce and expensive.'⁹¹ In these ways, 'the prosperity gospel's holistic approach to life can contribute to poverty alleviation'⁹² as well as to 'self-reliance, to self-worth, to dignity and to motivation to succeed'.⁹³ This is especially true because 'among many Africans, prosperity means having food on the table and affording the basic life needs.'⁹⁴ The practice of the Productivity Gospel thus does not bring fabulous riches to a few, but rather works to bring about greater *equity* (Paul's word in 2 Cor 8:14 is *isōtēs*) among believers.

By leveraging the Pentecostal prosperity 'teaching that God wants his children to live successful lives', the Productivity Gospel 'gives many Africans a positive mindset that they can make it in business through God, rather than by waiting for a Western donor to extend a helping hand'.⁹⁵ Mensa Otobil, senior pastor of the International Central Gospel Church in Accra, Ghana, is happy to be called a 'prosperity preacher', but Gifford suggests that label is misleading. Instead, Otobil's sermons tell believers not to ask God for money or other material possessions—'God will not give you money', he says—but to ask God for wisdom. 'Your God won't give you wealth', Otobil preaches, 'he gave you *power to create wealth*'.⁹⁶ In addition to his sermons, Otobil has explicitly developed a practical emphasis on empowerment for productivity in his *Four Laws of Productivity: God's Foundation for Living*.⁹⁷ His productivity teaching promotes 'empowerment of believers' perhaps precisely due to its insistence upon 'the ethics of responsibility'.⁹⁸ Togarasei notes that 'entrepreneurship teachings'—a crucial element of what I refer to as the Productivity Gospel—'have led a sizeable number of Pentecostals to start their own businesses, thus contributing to poverty alleviation through employment creation'.⁹⁹ The Productivity Gospel can thus teach 'an entrepreneurial spirit' by which 'Pentecostalism helps believers to discover the operative for wealth creation and financial intelligence'.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Zulu notes that 'a holistic view of prosperity in the Zambian context could help people in

90 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 354.

91 Maxwell, 'Delivered from the Spirit of Poverty?' 355.

92 Togarasei, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in African Contexts', 349.

93 Zulu, 'Fipelwa na baYaweh', 29.

94 Lovemore Togarasei, 'African Gospreneurship: Assessing the Possible Contribution of the Gospel of Prosperity to Entrepreneurship in Light of Jesus's Teaching on Earthly Possessions', in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Hermen Kroesbergen, 110–26 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 119.

95 Togarasei, 'African Gospreneurship', 123.

96 Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 120.

97 Habarurema, *Christian Generosity*, 290–91; Emmanuel Kwesi Amin, *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire? An Analysis of Prosperity Teaching in the Charismatic Ministries (Churches) in Ghana and Its Wider Impact* (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2021), 90, 214. There are two editions of Otobil's book, the first published by Vincom in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1991 and the second by Pneuma Life Publishing in Lanham, Maryland in 2002.

98 Habarurema, *Christian Generosity*, 291.

99 Togarasei, 'African Gospreneurship', 122.

100 Togarasei, 'African Gospreneurship', 121.

the extreme poverty levels to start to view themselves positively and work towards liberating themselves from ... demeaning situations.¹⁰¹

If you are rewarded, Productivity Gospel pastors preach, use your reward to make opportunities for others. Are you a businessperson? Grow your business not just for self-enrichment but so that you can hire more employees, for we are blessed to be a blessing. In congregations of Winners' Chapel in Nairobi, congregants are asked, 'If you were unemployed, have you gotten a job? If you were an employee, have you become an employer? If you were an employer, have you increased the number of your employees?'¹⁰² This is clearly no mere matter of selfishness and greed for gain but a desire to address systemic socio-economic injustice and bring blessing to others. Indeed, in all their congregations across Africa, 'Winners' Chapel strongly encourages and fosters entrepreneurship.'¹⁰³ This type of exhortation is common within many Pentecostal congregations in Africa.¹⁰⁴

There are two further things to note. First, this work is arguably done in obedience to Deuteronomy 15:11: 'Of course, there will never cease to be poor people in the country, and that is why I am giving you this command: Always be open handed with your brother, and with anyone in your country who is in need and poor' (NJB). Second, this is evidence of the accountability which is necessary to Christian discipleship. Togarasei has noted 'five ways by which the gospel contributes to poverty alleviation: encouraging entrepreneurship, employment creation, encouraging members to be generous, giving a positive mindset and encouraging a holistic approach to life'.¹⁰⁵ Proponents of the Productivity Gospel have turned away from the greed all too often exhibited by prosperity preachers and have actively adopted each of these five practices. The culture of congregations teaching the Productivity Gospel seems similar to the *koinonia* described in Acts—'a total sharing that includes the material as well as the spiritual'.¹⁰⁶

Typical prosperity teaching within African Pentecostalism has 'generated ... more broadly an incredibly high sense and spirit of generosity, unparalleled in the history of the church in Africa' as the result of 'a call to stewardship, which means Christians must have a holistic sense of giving' generously.¹⁰⁷ This spirit of generosity is found in the pews of prosperity churches even when church leaders are fleecing their flocks. But whereas, in many Prosperity Gospel contexts, calls for stewardship are issued hypocritically and not practised by the preacher, in Productivity Gospel contexts this type of stewardship and generosity is modelled by the church leadership. Thus, the Productivity Gospel also offers a foundation upon which to build what Habarurema refers to as 'a theology of stewardship and giving' in African contexts.¹⁰⁸ Whereas the Prosperity Gospel can operate as an attempted 'manipulation

101 Zulu, 'Fipelwa na baYaweh', 27–28.

102 Kyama Mugambi, private conversation, September 2016. For a similar example, see Gifford, 'Expecting Miracles', 20.

103 Gifford and Nogueira-Godsey, 'The Protestant Ethic and African Pentecostalism', 20.

104 For Kenya and Ghana specifically, see Kyama M. Mugambi, *A Spirit of Revitalization: Urban Pentecostalism in Kenya* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020).

105 Togarasei, 'The Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity', 349–50.

106 González, *Faith and Wealth*, 83.

107 Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, 94.

108 Habarurema, *Christian Generosity*, 284.

of a rather mechanical God',¹⁰⁹ the Productivity Gospel can more easily make room for expressions of gratitude through generosity. While many are convinced that 'one's wealth increases by hoarding one's possessions', Habarurema explains that prosperity preachers like Matthew Ashimolowo (a Nigerian serving as senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre, a London megachurch) teach that actually 'blessings come by releasing what one possesses'.¹¹⁰

Commenting on the socio-economic realities of Africa, Ghanaian theologian John Samuel Pobee observes:

Experience shows that in Africa the churches have, time and again, picked up the casualties of bad economic and political adventures. Such moves are easily swept from view under the rubric of social welfare activity or as part of the social responsibility of the churches. But at the end of the day, the churches' shouldering of these responsibilities has a theological rationale. For they are attempts by the church to model the gospel of hope in very difficult and trying circumstances and to shore up the fundamental concern of religion and theology for human-kind made in God's image and likeness.¹¹¹

This has perhaps especially been true in the context of the Productivity Gospel.

Conclusion

Clearly, 'a Jesus who is narrowly concerned about the saving of the soul for the future but neglects the holistic issues of life, including incumbent wellbeing, is not welcome in Africa.'¹¹² Both the Prosperity Gospel and the Productivity Gospel address the holistic concerns which are an intimate part of African worldviews. Evidence abounds that the 'health and wealth' emphases of the Prosperity Gospel can lead to heresy and corruption. But some of its core tenets are—even though acknowledgment of this fact may make some uncomfortable—biblical. When the Prosperity Gospel is used to manipulate and to support the self-aggrandizement and material enrichment of so-called pastors peddling their own personality cults rather than the good news of Jesus, this should be firmly rebuked and repudiated as heretical and anti-Christian. But on the other hand, those churches that teach and practice the Productivity Gospel have captured a biblical emphasis that speaks into the local cultures of Africa and provides a message of hope¹¹³ to the people.

109 Hermen Kroesbergen, 'The Prosperity Gospel: A Way to Reclaim Dignity?' in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Hermen Kroesbergen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 82.

110 Habarurema, *Christian Generosity*, 287.

111 John Samuel Pobee, *Giving Account of Faith and Hope in Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 131.

112 Devison Telen Banda, 'Jesus the Healer', in *In Search of Health and Wealth: The Prosperity Gospel in African, Reformed Perspective*, ed. Hermen Kroesbergen (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 56.

113 This hints at what Katongole calls a 'grammar of hope' that is 'theologically rich' in *Born from Lament*, 264.

Women in the Church Today

Amanda Jackson

Disagreements over the appropriateness of female pastors often obscure the much broader agreement that women have important gifts that should be deployed for the kingdom of God. Yet those gifts are often overlooked. In this article, the WEA's Senior Advisor on Diversity and former Director of its Women's Commission lays out a pathway towards greater engagement of women for the benefit of all.

When we talk about building the global church, why do we need to talk specifically about women? Of course, there are plenty of women in the church—that's no surprise. But we also have some heated controversies over what women should be doing, based on differences in biblical interpretation and cultural understanding.

If we can overcome those distortions and limitations with sensitivity, we can free women (and men too) to be fully effective in applying their gifts. And that has to be good news for the church!

Almost everyone would agree that women are created by God; are equally gifted as men; have equal responsibility with men to look after God's creation; and are equally sinful, equally redeemed and equally filled with the Holy Spirit.

Paul speaks of the church as a body (Rom 12:4–8), and nowhere does he say that certain gifts or parts of the body are reserved for only men or women. He does tell women in the churches at Corinth and Ephesus to learn quietly, and his apparently strongest statement on women's leadership function is in 1 Timothy. Some churches give priority to these verses over all other references to women's gifts, although recent scholarship has provided important local context on these verses.¹ Thoughtful evangelicals have disagreed over the application of these passages, and one more article on the topic will probably not resolve that disagreement. But Paul's instruction to overly enthusiastic female believers can hardly be treated as a blanket pronouncement for all time when he also encouraged women who were leaders of house churches, such as Phoebe (Rom 16:1–4), and valued Priscilla's teaching role (Acts 18:26).

Amanda Jackson (MA, Sydney University) is the WEA's Senior Advisor on Diversity and directed the WEA Women's Commission from 2015 to 2022. She is one of the pioneers of Rise in Strength, a network of international Christian women leaders. She founded the global Christian Network to End Domestic Abuse and is the chair of Kyria Network UK, which aims to equip and develop healthy female leadership. Email: amanda@worldidea.org.

1 As examples of this scholarship, see Margaret Mowczko, 'Why 1 Timothy 2:12 Shouldn't Be Used to Ban Women Ministers', 7 June 2023, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47411>; Gary Hoag, 'Demystifying Gender Issues in 1 Timothy 2:9–15, with Help from Artemis', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 44, no. 3 (August 2020): 242–49; Gary Hoag, 'Why Women Must Learn in Quietness and Submission: Xenophon of Ephesus and 1 Timothy 2', <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47412>. It is a pity that this debate still distracts us.

The Lausanne Movement's Cape Town Commitment, written in 2010, sets out the value and roles of men and women in this way:

All of us, women and men, married and single, are responsible to employ God's gifts for the benefit of others, as stewards of God's grace, and for the praise and glory of Christ. All of us, therefore, are also responsible to enable all God's people to exercise all the gifts that God has given for all the areas of service to which God calls the Church. We should not quench the Spirit by despising the ministry of any (1 Cor 12:4–11; Eph 4:7–16; 1 Pet 4:10–11).

Lausanne recognized that women and men are equally responsible in the kingdom of God to exercise all the gifts God has given them. All Christians are valued; there are no age, status, gender or ethnic barriers (1 Tim 4:12).²

New Testament accounts indicated that women were accepted as having and using all spiritual gifts and fulfilling all sorts of roles. Lydia was the first convert in Europe and opened her home as a house church, as did Mary of Jerusalem (mother of John Mark), Chloe and Phoebe—which almost certainly means they were leading those gatherings. The leader of the church addressed in 2 John was 'a chosen lady'. Philip's daughters were prophets. Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, was a teacher and close colleague of Paul. Junia was an apostle who was imprisoned with Paul. Women funded the work of the church and risked their lives for the gospel.

It is also notable that there seems to have been little hierarchy in the early church. Paul referred to his colleagues—men and women—simply as co-workers, saints, fellow workers or his beloved family (see Rom 16). The church functioned as a body with all the parts playing a vital role.

But the institutional church that developed over time was different. As power structures grew and especially after the church became aligned with the state, men

2 The Cape Town Commitment addressed the division over women by calling for a balanced approach, but its baseline was that there needed to be open doors for women to exercise their gifting. It stated: 'We recognize that there are different views sincerely held by those who seek to be faithful and obedient to Scripture. Some interpret apostolic teaching to imply that women should not teach or preach, or that they may do so but not in sole authority over men. Others interpret the spiritual equality of women, the exercise of the edifying gift of prophecy by women in the New Testament church, and their hosting of churches in their homes, as implying that the spiritual gifts of leading and teaching may be received and exercised in ministry by both women and men. We call upon those on different sides of the argument to:

1. Accept one another without condemnation in relation to matters of dispute, for while we may disagree, we have no grounds for division, destructive speaking, or ungodly hostility towards one another;
2. Study Scripture carefully together, with due regard for the context and culture of the original authors and contemporary readers;
3. Recognize that where there is genuine pain we must show compassion; where there is injustice and lack of integrity we must stand against them; and where there is resistance to the manifest work of the Holy Spirit in any sister or brother we must repent;
4. Commit ourselves to a pattern of ministry, male and female, that reflects the servanthood of Jesus Christ, not worldly striving for power and status.

We encourage churches to acknowledge godly women who teach and model what is good, as Paul commanded, and to open wider doors of opportunity for women in education, service, and leadership, particularly in contexts where the gospel challenges unjust cultural traditions. We long that women should not be hindered from exercising God's gifts or following God's call on their lives.'

came to dominate decision making. Church history has been written by men until very recently, so the contribution of women as mystics, prophets, writers, missionaries, evangelists, prayer warriors, justice advocates and administrators has been underplayed or even ignored.

Historians have looked to institutional written records for information rather than to families or communities where it was more difficult to access records, so women's roles have been buried. And theology books have underplayed women in the Bible narrative while tending to concentrate on more 'serious' matters of theology, or on heroic male leaders and kings. We all learn much from the examples of great men of faith, but we can also learn from the 188 named women in the Bible (as well as many more who are not named). We all know about Peter's declaration of faith in Jesus the Messiah (Mt 16:16–17), but Martha's declaration (Lk 11:27) is just as powerful.

After two thousand years of the church, what is the picture for women today and what is the impact on our witness?

We often hear about 'biblical womanhood', a term that has grown in popularity since the 1980s among some evangelical Christians in the USA. It refers to a woman who is helpful, quiet, supportive of her husband's ministry, a mother and a homemaker, submissive to her husband. Similarly, 'biblical manhood' evokes ideas of a strong, protective man, morally upright, a good provider, decision maker and head of the home.

All these qualities are positive, but if leadership and authority are always linked to gender—in family life and in the church—they create a dangerous black-and-white world of roles and responsibilities that clashes with spiritual gifting in the body. Do those models reflect what we see in the Bible, or are they a distortion of what it means to be male and female?

What do we make of women like Zipporah, Moses' wife, who corrected him about circumcision (and saved his life); Deborah, the judge who led Israel and inspired Barak to step up as an army commander; the prophet Huldah, who fearlessly advised King Josiah; and Lois and Eunice, who trained Timothy in faith? Conversely, the modern conception of 'biblical manhood' does not align easily with men like David, who was a poet and musician; Jeremiah and Nehemiah, who wept for their nation; or Stephen, who served the early church by managing food distribution for the poor.

In short, the church misses out if it has inflexible rules about leadership that prevent over half of all believers from serving in teaching and preaching roles.

Gina Zurlo, co-director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, USA, studies worldwide trends in religion; in 2023, she completed the first global study of women in Christianity.³ I can cover here only a few highlights of her amazing research. Zurlo found that more than 60 percent of regular attenders and people serving actively in the local church are women. Many of the women she interviewed were proud of their contribution and hard work. But they acknowledged that decision-making roles in churches still tend to look 'male'.

3 Gina A. Zurlo, *Women in World Christianity: Building and Sustaining a Global Movement* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2023).

Zurlo asked her respondents, ‘How do you think the chances of women and men compare when it comes to getting a position in a congregation?’ Not one person surveyed said that women would have a better chance than men of becoming senior pastor. The other categories strongly perceived as being for men were associate pastor, elder, overseer, youth pastor and board member.

Not surprisingly, the roles considered more likely to be filled by women were administrative assistant and children’s Sunday School teacher. Positions viewed as about equally likely to be occupied by men or women included financial secretary/treasurer, evangelist, worship leader, cleaner/janitor and intercessor.

Moreover, men dominated nearly all leadership positions in the respondents’ churches: pastor (96 percent men), overseer (92 percent), elder (89 percent), associate pastor (86 percent), youth pastor (80 percent), deacon (76 percent) and, to a lesser extent, family pastor, board member and adult Bible teacher.

How does that compare to the early church—specifically, with Jesus’s interactions with women, the roles women held, Paul’s teaching about spiritual gifts, and his radical statement in Galatians 3:28 that ‘We are all one in Christ; there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female’?

Let me tell you about some women I know who make up the varied and rich picture of the global church. (Some of the names have been changed.) They do not all lead in the same way, but in all cases, God has equipped them to be catalysts for the Kingdom.

Elya in Uzbekistan partners with her husband in church leadership. They have planted six new house churches in as many years. She is a mother to four boys, a wage earner, and a trainer and mentor to other pastors’ wives.

Raza in India is a human rights lawyer, called to work on anti-trafficking and gender-based religious persecution. She heads her own charity and is a gifted advocate. She is a mother to two girls and gets strong support from her husband in her risky work.

Abby in the UK is a pastor of a Pentecostal church. She was a pastor’s wife but then assumed the pastoral role herself after becoming widowed in her forties. She is obviously gifted in that role and mentors many younger women in the UK and Nigeria. Abby is a significant contributor to the assistance that local churches in her area are providing to asylum seekers.

Amina in Morocco has been a Christian for only three years, but she has strong understanding and maturity. She left home (very unusual for a single woman) because of family pressure to give up her faith but has continued to grow spiritually and is already a role model for other young women.

Erika in Romania is part of the global Christian Network to End Domestic Abuse (CNEDA, founded by the WEA and partners in 2020).⁴ A survivor of abuse by her husband, she suffered a double blow from her church leaders, who told her she must submit more fully to her abusive partner. Being part of a caring network of Christians has revived her faith and purpose.

4 See ‘The Christian Network to End Domestic Abuse’, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47413>.

Millions of other women have stories of gifting, service and transformation. We should not allow these women to be told they are equal in God's eyes but not equally respected or equally qualified to pastor, lead and mentor.

Beth Birmingham, an affiliate professor at Eastern University's College of Business and Leadership in Pennsylvania, designed and facilitated the university's global master's and PhD programs for Christian relief and development leaders. She wanted to see what it was like to be a woman in the aid and development sector, in both the secular world and the Christian world. She succinctly summarizes her findings regarding faith-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in four statistics: over 70 percent of general NGO staff are women; over 70 percent of beneficiaries are women; 70 percent of donors to faith-based non-profits are women (who may be making decisions for the whole family); but women make up less than 15 percent of leadership in the NGO sector.⁵

Birmingham and her co-author, Eeva Simard, argue that secular research centres such as Harvard, McKinsey or the London School of Economics can teach us about the cost to organizations of overlooking the leadership skills of women in key positions. McKinsey reported in 2020 that companies that have at least 35 percent diversity around the leadership table have 25 to 32 percent better return on investment, greater innovation and greater employee engagement.⁶

Churches should have a different way of measuring investment and success from the secular world, but we all want to use our talents wisely. Promoting gender diversity will lead to better mission outcomes and will help everyone feel valued. However, there is surprising resistance in this regard. Over the years, I have heard several common excuses from mission boards, NGOs and churches about why women are still missing from so many areas of decision making. Here they are with my responses.

- *Women won't say 'yes' to new opportunities.* It can take time to persuade women to assume leadership roles when they don't have many female role models or when they have been encouraged by church teaching to be quiet helpers. My advice is to take a chance and take the time to train and mentor women. Don't expect one female voice at the table to be the answer. If some choices don't work out, that does not mean all women will fail. We would never give up on all men if one or two did not make the grade.
- *Women do a fabulous job holding the family together, which supports men on the front line.* Praise God for all the wives and mothers who do back-room organizing and care for family across the generations, but many women would like to be homemakers without giving up their gifting and calling. That may mean more shared responsibilities at home and some honest conversations about co-working.
- *Women can be a risk.* There is a long tradition of viewing women as a temptation, and if they are involved in leadership, meetings and travel, that can create an extra perceived risk. Apart from the fact that this argument

5 Beth Birmingham and Eeva Simard, *Creating Cultures of Belonging: Cultivating Organizations Where Women and Men Thrive* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2022).

6 McKinsey and Company, 'Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters', 19 May 2020, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47414>.

assumes men are incapable of resisting temptation (!), it is possible to establish simple, workable standards around behaviour (just as about working with children). In addition, if co-working is the norm, there will be less tension around male-female relationships.

- *Making changes in this realm sounds like feminism, and feminism is un-Christian.* God established the idea of men and women working together when he commanded both to care for the garden of Eden. Sin distorted that equality plan, but Jesus restored it. Churches have a wonderful opportunity to talk of God's vision of equality, which is a richer concept than modern feminism.
- *Why do women want to take over?* I hear this line spoken in a joking way, but it expresses a genuine concern that good and gifted (white) men could be pushed aside by women, millennials or diverse ethnicities. However, this concern views leadership in the wrong way. God's vision is for mutuality, co-working and the recognition of gifting, not a hierarchy of power. The model of mutuality brings fresh voices to the table. That may be a bit uncomfortable for those used to leading, but it will empower many more people to engage in mission.

Some basic practical changes would make it much easier to increase diversity at the decision-making table in churches and NGOs. For example, flexible working hours, more part-time work opportunities for both men and women, granting time for family obligations such as childcare and elderly parents, and taking time to discuss and explore decisions so that quieter, less extraverted people can be heard—all these steps could see more women released to contribute and lead.

We should also accept different types of leadership and different views of what success looks like. Alpha male leadership hinders men who are not directive leaders, restricts women who may be equipped to lead, and causes stress for teams working under non-consultative leaders. At its worst, uncontested male leadership can lead to bullying or to sexual or emotional abuse.

I want to encourage all of us in our churches and parachurch settings to be co-workers and co-leaders, working as parts of a body and all contributing our gifts and skills so that young and old, women and men, white and black and brown, Spanish speakers, English speakers and Yoruba speakers all have a voice.

Peirong Lin and I co-edited a book on this topic in 2021.⁷ It explores theology around the roles and responsibilities of women in the church, and it draws on the experiences of 12 women and men across the world who discuss the positive results and challenges of co-leading. In his foreword to the book, WEA Secretary General Thomas Schirrmacher wrote of his hope 'that all Christians can work together for equal opportunity, equality in ministry according to gifting and for recognition of the very real contribution women make as we pray, "Your Kingdom come."'

7 Amanda Jackson and Peirong Lin, *Co Workers and Co-Leaders: Women and Men Partnering for God's Work* (WEA Global Issues Series, 2021), available as a free download at <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47415>.

Items for reflection

1. Please take a look at the Call to All Christians.⁸ This could be a discussion starter for your team.
2. Consider how the ideas in this Call to All Christians impact you, your emotional responses and your roles in the church.
3. What does a 'healthy' church look like for women and men? Consider this question in terms of gifts, roles, leadership and witness to the community.

8 See <https://worldea.org/yourls/47416>.

Adam and Eve, Where Are You? A Missionary Philosophy of God's Questions for Humanity

Thomas K. Johnson

People who do not know God often believe illogical things about the world, either because they have not thought about the issues seriously, uncritically accept views from the culture around them, or are subconsciously hiding from God's truth. Based on his many years of teaching in a secular context, the WEA's senior theological advisor suggests 10 questions that we can use to help people question their assumptions and become open to God's answers.

Several years ago, while living in Prague, I walked into my fitness center. I heard the Bloodhound Gang belting out at high decibels over the sound system, 'You and me baby ain't nothin' but mammals, so let's do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.'¹ At the other end of the room I saw artwork depicting a sitting Buddha, portraying the search for a balanced, harmonious way of life. While running on a treadmill or grunting with heavy weights, I realized, people are also wrestling with God in the middle of the human quest. From opposite ends of the room, two very different answers (the Bloodhound Gang and the Buddha) were being preached to them.

God continually confronts us with questions that force us to look for answers, and most people do not seem to totally believe the answers they hear coming from hedonistic evolutionism (as embodied in the Bloodhound Gang) or Eastern religions.

Ever since God asked Adam and Eve, 'Where are you?' the voice of God echoing through the universe has raised questions that seem to arise unavoidably in human experience. The very fact of human existence forces us to consider the big questions—Who am I? What am I? What is my place in the world? Why does anything exist?—while we also look for courage in the face of unavoidable threats to everything we value. These big, universal questions drive us to search for ultimate truth, even if the answers found might not sufficiently address our anxieties.

Our ability to appreciate the biblical message and communicate that message to our neighbours will increase if we distinguish the universal questions from the threats we all face. The questions are more cognitive, whereas the threats (such as

Thomas K. Johnson (PhD, University of Iowa, USA) is the World Evangelical Alliance's senior theological advisor. He taught philosophy and ethics for nearly 20 years at secular universities in Europe.

1 In the meantime, things have changed so that one would no longer see frequent mammal mating on the Discovery Channel.

death, illness or poverty) are more existential. Of course, our answers to these questions form the building blocks for an entire worldview or philosophy of life which attempts to answer our questions and address the threats to our lives.

We are born into the world, or we might say we are thrown into the world,² and from our youngest years we feel compelled to try to understand ourselves and our world. We hear answers to our questions offered during our childhood and youth—from family, neighbours, religions, schools, music, movies, art and TV. We wonder if we can truly accept the answers offered by our own religion or culture, if another religion or culture is offering better answers, or if we must remain confused and uncertain about the universe and ourselves. Because of globalization, we hear answers offered by many different religions and worldviews. Yet each of us has to face personally the big questions raised by the experience of existence. Even the decision to hide behind the answers of our own religious or cultural tradition is a personal choice.

Many of the answers to the big questions of life come in the form of a narrative or meta-story which attempts to interpret all of human experience and give direction to all of life. This is why communism, cultural Marxism, Islam, New Age, consumerism and atheistic evolution are attractive to many. Each of these attempts to place one's personal life inside a universal story. And yet, even if people largely accept a story that attempts to answer their quest, they often remain of two minds, deeply uncertain about the narratives they hear. Whatever story they seem to accept, there is always a difference between professed beliefs and practised beliefs. God's general revelation pushes people to simultaneously presuppose transcendental beliefs about human dignity, the creation order, and the moral law which contradict the lyrics of many other songs they sing, so that most cannot fully believe their own words.

The biblical message provides real and better answers to the big questions of our existence. But it goes much further. It explains why there is this God-given relationship between the human quest and the historically offered answers; it helps us ask the right questions; it explains why the answers to some of our big questions are implicit in God's general revelation, which everyone has to rely on to function as a human but which a sense of threat causes people to repress; and it explains why people do not fully believe the many inadequate alternative answers.

In the opening chapters of the Bible, God's question to Adam and Eve, 'Where are you?' came before the answer. And the answer was the promise of redemption, that the offspring of a woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). At first, this answer was vague and probably poorly understood, but it showed that the promise of redemption is the ultimate answer to the problem identified by God's question. God wants us to be conscious and aware of both our need and the solution which God provides. God is interested in a conscious interaction with us that fully engages our subjectivity. This is part of what God is continuing to do in his general revelation, so that God's pre-missionary work of asking questions comes before our missionary work of giving biblical answers. (Of course, God is the ultimate missionary; we are only secondary missionaries.) For this reason, it is wise for all Christians to consider how the Bible answers the universal questions and to become

2 I am borrowing some terms from Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) without endorsing all of his philosophy.

comfortable discussing these questions at length. In the process of discussing the big questions with people who do not yet believe in Christ, their awareness of their status as questioned (by God's general revelation) and their need for answers can be strengthened, while we also offer them biblical answers.

For the sake of strategic analysis, I distinguish between angst-driven questions, such as 'How can I endure pain?' or 'How do I avoid poverty and starvation?' and quest-driven questions, such as 'What is the origin of the world and of human life?' or 'How do we know what we know about right and wrong?' But God's general revelation forms the background for both types of questions. Angst often prevents people from acknowledging truths they know, with the result that people may need to experience the biblical message addressing the threats to our lives before they can fully acknowledge the truths they know because of general revelation.

In the secular university context where I taught for almost 20 years, mostly in post-communist countries, I used 10 ultimate questions to illustrate the matters thoughtful people should consider as part of their human quest. The remainder of this article comments on those 10 questions, which are frequently asked all around us—in literature and philosophy, religions and ideologies. They occur to thoughtful people who are not afraid to look for truth. My children raised some of these questions when they were young. Whenever education steps beyond basic skills and simple information—which it must do in order to be education suitable for humans—it has to engage such big questions. Just as almost every television show, movie or popular song depicts people wrestling with the angst-laden issues of guilt, forgiveness, meaning and duty, so also there is hardly a cultural event or educational institution which can avoid considering the big questions that lie in, under and behind all our concerns. Because God presents life's big questions via general revelation as a way of driving people to the answers in special revelation, we can see a profound correlation between serious human questions and biblical answers.

During my career teaching religions, ethics and philosophy in secular universities, largely with students who were not Christians, I chose to emphasize questions of this type, hopefully with flexibility and creativity, as they arise in the many different fields of university study. Such questions have come naturally into the classroom discussion whether the theme of the course was philosophy of religion, political theory, medical ethics, the history of ethics or the history of Christianity. I have tried to use a Socratic method of classroom teaching, leading with questions before offering answers, similar to what I believe the apostle Paul described in Romans 2:15.

While discussing these questions in a university classroom, I would keep in mind that students (like all people) already know the answers to many of the questions because of the rich content of general revelation, but that they may hold that knowledge in a rejected or repressed status in their minds and hearts. For this reason, I move very slowly from life questions to biblical answers, giving students time to wrestle with the questions and quietly consider why they may already know some of the answers but may not dare to acknowledge that they do.

1. What has always existed? Is it one or is it many? Is it spirit or matter? Is it God or the gods? Is it time and chance? Is it dialectical matter? Is it energy?

When I asked students, 'What has always existed?' I would then go on to mention some of the possible answers that normally occur to people in different cultures, emphasizing that whatever answer one believes, that answer has to truly explain the world and our experience of it. Depending on the pattern of classroom discussion, I have pointed out that it is difficult to imagine that our experience of knowledge, hope, love, personality and concern for justice is fully explained either by an impersonal source of the universe (such as matter, energy and chance) or by polytheism (which lacks an explanation for the unity of the universe and the unity of knowledge). Sometimes I say that the claim that matter, energy and chance are the three entities that have always existed is very similar to polytheism, because each view posits multiple eternal entities. I assume that all people know, but may pretend not to know, about God's eternal power and divine nature, so that this discussion should prompt serious spiritual discomfort.

Of course, my Christian answer to the question is centred in the doctrine of the Trinity, and in the belief that the unity of God, as the source of all that exists, explains the unified nature of the universe and truth, while the eternal relationships among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit explain the way in which relationships (and relational values such as love, justice and honesty) have an ultimate source and place of existence. On occasion, I have pointed out that the doctrine of the Trinity is the solution to the question about the relation between the 'one' and the 'many', which shows that both unity and multiplicity have equal ultimacy.³ But sometimes I have chosen not to answer the question, 'What has always existed?' because I want the students to wrestle further with the truths which they know but can hardly admit to knowing. According to the apostle Paul, my students already know the answer to that question. I also discovered that some university students became curious about me personally and Googled me, ending up with a printed version of a Christian article I had written in their backpacks while they were discussing philosophy with me in a secular university classroom. After class, they felt free to talk more openly about their questions.

2. What does it mean that we are human? What is the morally significant difference between a dog and a human?

When I have asked what it means to be human and how humans differ from my dog, very few students have said there is no morally significant difference between humans and animals. As a result of being created in God's image, and as a part of God's ongoing general revelation, people have a direct intuition and knowledge that

³ Solutions to the question of the one and the many which say the one is truly ultimate tend to correspond with totalitarian or collectivist social and political theories, whereas solutions that say the many are truly ultimate tend to correspond with individualistic socio-political theories. A trinitarian solution corresponds with saying both the collective and the individual are real but emphasizes our relations with each other in multiple social organizations and institutions.

humans are distinct in the universe and carry a special type of dignity which deserves respect. This God-given intuition stands in tension with what many people in secular universities are taught to believe about human nature (which is often related to atheistic versions of evolutionary theory), while at the same time, it stands behind the concerns for human rights which so many people affirm. If people affirm human dignity, then they cannot avoid the question of the source of that dignity; if people deny human dignity, then why should we not devour each other like animals?

When lecturing on human nature and human rights, I have sometimes made the prayer from Psalm 8:3–8 one of my first references to the Bible as the answer to the human quest: ‘When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honour. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.’ These words provide a beautiful answer to the longing to understand oneself which many people feel but cannot explain without the biblical message. I strongly affirm the common Christian observation that knowing God leads to truly knowing ourselves (and other humans) and that truly knowing ourselves can also lead to knowing God. Sometimes the first step towards accepting the Christian faith is for people to begin to put into words their previously unformulated intuitions that humans are distinct in the universe. Then the biblical explanations of human uniqueness may begin to warm their hearts.

3. Why do we know so much about right and wrong? How can it be that people in so many times and places have had somewhat similar ideas about right and wrong?

When I raise the question of why we know so much about right and wrong, I sometimes phrase the question as ‘Why do we know more about right and wrong than we want to know?’ In view of Romans 1, we know that people are not ignorant about right and wrong; the problem in ethics is that people do not like what they know about right and wrong because of God’s general revelation, and that they cannot fully explain what they know about right and wrong without explicitly mentioning God. And once we mention God as the source of our moral knowledge, all the reactions related to moral angst become more prominent.

The most common responses about the source of moral knowledge that I have heard in university classrooms have been some variety of culturally based moral relativism which claims moral rules only arise from a particular culture and do not have global validity. Of course, some morally important matters are culturally relative, so it is necessary for us to learn the local rules and to follow them. For example, we are morally obligated to drive on the right side of the road in some countries and the left side in other countries. One must recognize this area of moral relativity, even though it is often strongly overemphasized, to have an honest conversation. But at the secular universities where I have taught, students tended to say everything was morally relative, meaning that right and wrong depend entirely on local expectations; then,

without recognizing the self-contradiction, they go on to assume that everyone knows they must not break certain rules such as not murdering, stealing, raping, committing cannibalism or deceiving other people. (Only once did I meet a student who seriously claimed it is morally acceptable for a culture to practice cannibalism. I have heard much more uncertainty about whether truth telling is morally required.) Then one can ask, 'Why do people say everything is morally relative, even though they do not really think everything is morally relative?' and 'What does this internal contradiction tell us about human nature and about the universe?' At this point in the discussion, I think it is sometimes best to let people wrestle with the questions, not giving answers too quickly, because I suspect that such people are wrestling directly with God.

4. Why do we correctly assume we can usually trust our five senses, even before we have asked if we can trust our senses?

Most of the students I have taught had little doubt that they can trust their five senses under normal circumstances, but only rarely have students been able to give any explanation of why they think their senses provide truth about the universe. Nor can most explain how it is that the human race has come to trust its five senses. (I believe every answer I have heard from students in a philosophy classroom has involved a story about the origins and development of the human race as a part of evolution.) Though the topic merits further explanation, I believe that we can trust our senses because God created us such that there is a natural three-way correlation among our senses, the categories of understanding in our minds, and the universe outside our minds. Furthermore, God gives us direct awareness of this correlation as part of his general revelation, so much so that some people never consider why they trust their senses.

Once the question becomes explicit, it pushes people to begin to recognize the role that God plays in our lives, even if we try to ignore him. God's continuing general revelation is the ultimate condition (behind several secondary conditions) that enables our normal human experience of knowing we can usually trust our senses. A few students were inclined to say they were skeptics with regard to their five senses, an inclination which leads some people into deep personal problems (such as the despair of suspecting that everyone they know is the creation of their own imagination). Therefore, I have not usually asked students, 'Can you trust your five senses?' Instead, I usually phrase the question in terms like 'Why is it that you know you can trust your senses?' This phrasing tends to point people towards the hidden theological assumptions in their daily process of knowing the world around them.

5. How do we know that truth is unified, so that the truths of chemistry do not contradict the truths of biology or mathematics, even before we consider the question?

In the developed world, everyone seems to assume there are real truths in realms such as chemistry, biology, physics and mathematics; furthermore, everyone seems to assume that the truths in these areas are unified, meaning that the truths in one field do not contradict those in another field. This assumption about the unity of

truth makes technological development possible. Although everyone makes these normal academic assumptions, at the very same time, some people deny that we can know truth about the universe. And on serious reflection, almost everyone has to admit that normal people do not learn about this unity of truth in the natural sciences by means of scientific experimentation or other uses of their five senses. Rather, the unity of truth in natural science is an expectation that we bring to the process of science.

There is much about the existence, nature and unity of truth that people very commonly assume (even if a few claim to deny these truths), and I believe such assumptions are proper because these truths are part of God's general revelation which makes normal human experience possible. At first, some people have difficulty grasping these questions because they seem very theoretical, and some people resist asking such questions because they secretly want to suppress their knowledge of God. But these questions arise to thoughtful people because God is questioning us in a manner that drives us to recognize his role in human life. Many Christians can learn to discuss these questions in a manner that makes the questions more explicit and helps people to consider the biblical answers.

6. How do we know that other people have minds, even though most of us have never seen a proof of the existence of the minds of other people?

I have used the question about proving the existence of other minds for a specific purpose in Western universities: to illustrate the need to reform some models of knowledge that dominate our educational systems and that have been inappropriately used in relation to God. Since the Enlightenment (starting around 1650), educational systems following the Western model have used models of proving knowledge that are very good in relation to knowing physical things, such as building a bridge that is safe or curing medical problems. Whether in a school or a scientific laboratory, we commonly think we know something either on the basis of empirical evidence or on the basis of logical or mathematical proof. The relevant question inside this perspective is whether we are using inductive or deductive reasoning. This approach to knowing is very beneficial for everyday knowledge, reducing the amount of dangerous nonsense that people believe, while contributing massively to scientific and technological development. However, this method of knowing has been inappropriately applied to knowing about the non-physical realm. Thereby it easily becomes an important way in which people suppress their direct knowledge of God, making it easier for people to say that they do not know God even though they really do know God. (In a philosophy class, I describe this problem as classical or narrow foundationalism.)

One step towards showing that this valuable model of knowledge is commonly used in an inappropriate manner is to show that we do not, cannot and should not use this model of knowing in relation to other people. There may not be any totally satisfactory inductive or deductive proof that the important people in our lives in fact have minds, but we all know that our loved ones (and even people we do not like) have minds much like our own. And if someone develops a real proof of the

existence of the minds of other people, that proof may be too complex for many people to understand. The problem here is with the model of what we describe as real knowledge within our educational systems, not with any real uncertainty that my wife, children or grandchildren have minds. It is our certainty about the reality of the minds of other people that makes it possible to reevaluate the way we claim to gain certainty of knowledge in education and scientific research.

Every day, everyone uses methods of knowing other people that do not fit into our Enlightenment models of knowledge, and we all think this is perfectly proper because it is necessary for our daily lives. We assume that the method of knowing should correspond to the area of knowledge. So, too, I have argued in university classes that we should not use Enlightenment models of scientific knowing to claim that we cannot know God. While discussing this technical-sounding philosophical argument, I assume that my students are really wrestling with God at some level, and that my role is to simply take away one of the educational tools some have been using to hide from God's direct claim on their lives.⁴

7. Is there something terribly wrong with the world or with human nature? If so, what?

When discussing this question in secular university classrooms, I have obtained the impression from student reactions that many have considered the question, though the question itself is in tension with much of secular thought. It is commonly said today that we cannot learn or derive 'ought' from 'is' or, conversely, that we cannot learn 'ought not' from 'is'. This is one of the principles of modern and postmodern culture that everyone is supposed to know and follow, which is consistent with believing in atheistic evolution and with any worldview that does not see any purpose in the universe.

But very few people (if any) honestly follow this principle. Most people think there is something terribly wrong with the world or with human nature or that something must be done to make the world a better place. We all see and read reports of suffering, oppression and the inhumanity of man against man and immediately feel that something is wrong or that something must be changed. Everyone seems to know that what is ought not to be, thereby denying a cardinal principle of secular education in the Western world that few people really believe. (This reminds me of the situation in the communist countries of Eastern Europe during the last decades of communism. Everyone was supposed to believe the communist ideology, but many realized that few people honestly believed the required ideology.)

Once we begin to discuss this question sensitively, people are again driven to ponder why they ask this question and how they know important truths that are inconsistent with unbelief. God is continuously and quietly asking, 'Adam and Eve, what is wrong with you?' By openly raising the question in an educational situation, we push people to consider it more vigorously. And the people with whom we are working will probably soon discover what we believe is the answer.

4 For a good introduction to the problems of narrow foundationalism, see Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 69–92.

8. Why do we find ourselves alienated from ourselves and each other? Is there a solution?

It is amazing that so many people can describe alienation so brilliantly. Students often describe truly horrible conflicts between their mother and their father, or a deep separation of themselves from their parents. I have listened to students who feared that a murder in the family was a real and present danger. What is amazing is that, in the process, almost everyone communicates an overwhelming sense that this is not how things should be, often mixed with hope for improvement or reconciliation, though their sense that there is such a thing as healthy relationships and their hope for reconciliation contradict their entire worldview.

The key point to notice for our missionary philosophical purposes is that everyone assumes, usually without qualifications, that conflict and alienation are bad and present a problem to be solved, not that conflict and alienation simply are. If, as the Bloodhound Gang claims, we are nothing but mammals, the most we could seriously claim is that one does not like conflict and alienation, while our social scientists would investigate whether alienation helps or hurts the economy.⁵ But almost no one ever says that conflict and alienation simply are. Everyone I have ever heard describe conflict and alienation assumes that we all know something significant about what peaceful, wholesome relationships look like, even if they have not seen peaceful relationships and their basic worldview would say that conflict simply is, not that conflict is bad.

I believe there is still an echo in the human heart of the time in the garden of Eden (before Adam and Eve were alienated from God, from themselves, from each other and from the rest of creation), which gives significant hints about what non-alienated relationships should look like. Part of being human is not only to know what alienation and conflict are but also to sense, perhaps vaguely, that conflict and alienation should not exist. By phrasing the question as ‘Why do we find ourselves alienated from ourselves and each other?’ we can easily move to the question of why we are able to recognize alienation as such and to know that alienation and conflict should not exist. Phrasing the question in this manner also allows us to easily enter into dialogue with the descriptions of alienation provided by many philosophers, sociologists and journalists.

Some of my students in Eastern Europe knew the penetrating sociological descriptions of alienation that Karl Marx penned as a young man, descriptions which moved him to look for something better for society. Marx hoped for a type of redemption, though few of my students have believed that the revolution by the proletariat that Marx prophesied would provide that redemption.⁶ Talking about alienation is a way to remind people of something they know but may have pushed

5 I am convinced that family conflict and the breakup of marriages contribute to many other social problems, including economic problems at the national level, but that is a theme for another study.

6 In Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), he described four types of worker alienation: from the product of his labour, the act of producing, himself as a worker, and his fellow workers. Many have observed that Marx was both influenced by and alienated from the Jewish and Christian religions. I believe his theory of alienation was possible because of an echo of the garden of Eden in the human heart which is maintained by God’s continuing general revelation.

from their minds. In looking at Romans 1:27, we notice that a theme in God's general revelation is the creation order or scheme of life that refers back to the mandates given in creation and thereby to the conditions in the garden of Eden before the fall of the human race. Talking about alienation is a step towards helping people see themselves as questioned by God, 'Adam and Eve, why are you separated from everything?' This can lead to seeing their need for redemption in Christ, not only reconciliation in relation to each other and to the rest of creation.

9. Is being male and female more than an accident of anatomy?

The university students I have taught in the post-communist world generally came from a background that included a partial definition of gender roles and identity but that has been marked by a huge amount of family dysfunction and frequent divorce. At the same time, the educational system is increasingly marked by an understanding of humanness that includes a very problematic understanding of the relation between a person's body and a person's self. Whereas at one time, many held the opinion that one is his body, assuming that our bodies are the entirety of our humanness, more people now seem to think that one's real self (usually meaning what was called the soul or the spirit in previous generations) exists in total independence from the body. Within this recent way of thinking, a female self might accidentally be born with a male body, or a male self might accidentally be born with a female body.

Though I find this way of thinking very strange, it fits with (and may result from) ways of understanding human nature in our cultural and religious history that describe the distinction between the soul and the body as too large. I believe God created me as a male soul and a male body, though I do not understand how God weaves a body and soul together to make the complete whole we call a person. Some of the alienation from the self that people experience exists at this level; it is part of our alienation from the entirety of God's creation order. I believe people are questioned by God's general revelation in this realm.

Obviously, one has to be very careful while discussing this theme, since it can be far more personal than a question such as 'How do we know that truth is unified?' For some people, questions about gender identity are closely tied to both moral and existential angst; guilt, shame and loss of personal meaning can overshadow both the question and possible answers. Some people appear to look for meaning by means of saying something about themselves that may be intended to shock others.

Because of the subjects I was teaching at the university level, this question has arisen less frequently in the classroom than some of the others. However, it is one for which people need biblical answers combined with a reconciling relationship with other people and with God.

10. Does history have a meaning, direction or shape? Is it a line, a circle, or something else?

Existential angst, the sense that life might not have any meaning, leads people to wonder if the history of the human race or the history of the universe is coming from somewhere or going somewhere. In some form or another, every worldview, religion

and ideology presents a big story which tries to shed light and meaning on one's personal, small story. Many have posited that the world goes through a circular process that is repeated many times, perhaps an infinite number of times, in a process of millions or billions of years. The communists claimed that history moves from feudalism through capitalism into socialism by means of class struggle, giving meaning to the life of the individual according to the person's place in the inevitable flow of history. Jews and Christians, influenced by the Bible, think of history as a finite line from creation to final judgement; of course, we should say that the fall accomplished by Adam and Eve and the redemption accomplished by Christ are also decisive steps in the process of history.

In my years of teaching in secular universities, I found that most students were very comfortable talking about views of history (without high levels of angst), and most understood that it is a fundamental question that everyone should answer. Curiously, most of the North American and European students I have taught have openly acknowledged that their views of history were linear and shaped by the Bible, even if they were atheists. Most have simply accepted a linear view of history as being as much a part of the Western cultural inheritance as democracy is and have recognized the communist view of history as a heresy based on the Western view. Yet the biblical answer, which sees God as the Creator and Sustainer of history and the Judge at the end of history, is an answer which produces overwhelming angst if one does not know the biblical gospel of salvation in Christ. The real answer to the direction and shape of history is the biblical account of creation, fall, redemption and Christ's final return; the question occurs to many thoughtful people.

Conclusion

The human quest for answers is closely associated with angst, our awareness of our fragility and fallenness. We find ourselves threatened in several ways, while we are also questioned by the universe. Although there are also secondary causes in the life of each person and culture, it is valuable to see that God's voice echoing through the universe is the ultimate cause behind this entire process of being questioned and feeling alternately threatened and supported. Even if my interpretation of God's questions for humanity needs improvement, we can see an important relationship between the biblical message and human experience: the Bible provides answers to the questions of fallen life. Considering God's questions for humanity helps us to perceive the deeply religious element in philosophy and culture.

This means that, in a certain way, the existence of secular philosophy, literature, culture and entertainment, as well as the existence of Eastern religions, is the result of God's questions for humanity. If God were not asking questions, we humans would not be on a continuous quest for answers. Therefore, Christians do not have to be excessively afraid of the questions that arise in supposedly secular cultures, or of those raised in very religious cultures. Through creation, the God of the Bible is questioning humanity; in redemption, that same God provides the answers.

Protestantism, Early Baptists and the Emergence of Human Rights

Evert Van de Poll

The development of modern understandings of human rights is widely attributed to Enlightenment thinkers, but Christians had constructed similar arguments even earlier. This article traces that history with primary reference to three early Baptists whose worldviews were shaped by the intolerance they experienced.

The idea of human rights is widely accepted as a foundation of legislation and political action. It is the cornerstone of liberal democracies, the ideal held out against oppression and injustice all over the world. At the same time, it arouses debate and criticism from all parts. Different groups fight for different causes while appealing to the same principle of human rights.

There is also disagreement over the origin of the modern conception of human rights. The commonly held view that human rights are the fruit of the European and American Enlightenment in the 18th century has been questioned. In this article, I show how Protestant Christianity, especially the Baptist movement in the early 17th century, played a crucial role. I want not only to set the historical record straight, but also to consider how the particular origins of human rights are relevant for the development of this principle in today's societies.

Definition

According to one formal definition, 'Human rights are rights belonging to every human being, which every (appropriately situated) human being is obligated to respect.'¹ These rights are held by all persons equally, irrespective of their citizenship, ethnicity, religion, gender, or other specific attributes. They are inalienable: you cannot lose these rights any more than you can cease to be human.²

In claiming these human rights, everyone also accepts the responsibility not to infringe on the rights of others and to support those whose rights are abused or denied.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted by the United Nations in 1948, consists of 30 articles defining the basic civil rights that must be

Evert Van de Poll (PhD, Leuven) is Professor of Religious Studies and Missiology at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit (ETF) in Leuven, Belgium and visiting professor of missiology at the Faculté Libre de Théologie Évangélique in Vaux-sur-Seine, France. Email: evandepoll@orange.fr.

1 Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47.

2 Pam Costain, 'Moving the Agenda Forward', *Connection to the Americas* 14, no. 8 (October 1997): 4.

respected by every UN member state. It states, 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. ... Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.'

In Europe and in the Western world at large, human rights are the ultimate frame of reference for the struggle against injustice, poverty and discrimination. They are foundational principles of the Council of Europe and the European Union.

Debate

Since the UDHR of 1948, there has been an ongoing discussion about the interpretation of certain human rights, while others have sought to add new rights to the list. In many parts of the world, human rights are criticized as biased by 'Western thinking'.

Even within the European realm, there are quite different reactions. An increasing number of Europeans are concerned about the way in which human rights are defined and worked out in liberal democracies today. While some advocate for freedom of abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage in the name of human rights, others see this as an undermining of key moral values and appeal to principles of human rights to defend their view as well.

In this paper, I highlight three Baptists who played a pioneering role in the emergence of human rights: Thomas Helwys, Richard Overton and Roger Williams. Before that, I will offer some general remarks about the history of human rights.

The history of human rights: getting the record straight

How and where did the idea of universal human rights emerge? As Richard Amesbury has stated:

Human rights are said to be universal, but *thinking* about human rights, and the *language* in which this thought is expressed, is neither universal nor ahistorical. Like all moral discourse, it developed in a particular time and place, in response to various historical forces.³

The Enlightenment

According to the conventional and still popular view, human rights are a fruit of the Enlightenment.⁴ From the late 17th century onwards, as Europe was in the aftermath of devastating religious wars and still wrestling with the principle of religious tolerance, Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Baron Montesquieu, Adam Smith, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison attempted to provide a secular, rationalist basis for the governance of society. They developed the idea that every person, by virtue of the fact that he or she is a human being, is entitled to certain civil rights and should be granted certain individual freedoms—in particular, the freedom of opinion and of religious practice.

3 Richard Amesbury and George Newlands, *Faith and Human Rights: Christianity and the Global Struggle for Human Dignity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 41.

4 Amesbury and Newlands, *Faith and Human Rights*; Danièle Lochak, *Les droits de l'homme* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002).

The first documents to enshrine this view were the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of the French Revolution (1789). These two declarations were ground-breaking in Western political history. They marked the beginning of a process by which basic human rights would eventually become enshrined in national constitutions and international agreements such as the Geneva conventions and the UDHR.

Earlier origins

But this view is inadequate, because it ignores the preceding historical context. In fact, Enlightenment philosophers took up ideas that had developed previously in the context of European Christianity. Historians who take a critical look at the origin of universal human rights point out that these are not different from 'natural' and 'constitutional' rights that had been defined at an earlier stage. One of those historians, John Witte, explains:

It is now clear that the Enlightenment was not so much a wellspring of Western rights as a watershed in a long stream of human rights theory and law that had already drawn in classical and biblical sources, Roman and civil law, medieval philosophy and canon law, early modern Catholic and Protestant law and theology, and more. It is a telling anecdote that, by 1650, every right that would appear in the United States Bill of Rights had already been defined, defended, and died for by various Protestants and Catholics of their day.⁵

Human rights are embedded in a long history of rights discourse in the Western Christian tradition. Its roots go even further back to Roman understandings of rights, and to theories of liberty developed in the city-states of ancient Greece.

Heritage of Christianity

The emergence of universal human rights has a general background and a specific context. The general background is European Christianity. According to the Judeo-Christian worldview, there is only one God who has created all things including mankind, so there is only one humanity. Moreover, God has created man in his image, which implies that every human being has an individual moral status. This notion became foundational for the Christian world and later for Western liberalism. Larry Siedentop calls it 'the invention of the individual'. Enlightenment philosophers liked to trace their ideas further back to the writings of Greek and Roman philosophers, but as Siedentop points out, their emphasis on individual freedom stands in sharp contrast with the inequality of the Roman and Greek societies and the egalitarian views of their philosophers. They owe their ideas largely to Christian thinking.⁶

Christianity also gave birth to the notion of universal equality. A major inspirational source has been the apostle Paul's repeated exhortation that 'in Christ there is

5 John Witte, 'Roots and Routes of Rights', 1 July 2015, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/47417>. He reacts to the thesis put forward by Samuel Moyn in *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (2010), which contends that human rights as they are now understood, i.e. as an international standard of morality or justice, began to emerge only during the 1970s.

6 Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2014; New York: Penguin, 2015).

neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, Barbarian nor Scythian' (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11).

The cultures and the societies of Europe are profoundly marked by the legacy of Athens, Rome and Jerusalem. French political scientist Jean-Claude Guillebaud summarizes this legacy:

Jewish prophetism has given us a view of time that underlies the idea of *progress*.

To Christianity we owe both the concept of the *individual* and the desire for *equality*.

Greece has invented reason. Hellenism of the first centuries, and notably Paul of Tarsus, have fixed a certain image of the *universal*.

The Judeo-Christian message has produced a concept of *justice* that was received and secularized by the Enlightenment.⁷

Clearly, all these basic notions have a bearing on what we now understand by universal human rights. Enlightenment philosophers couched such ideas in secular language and gave them a rational foundation to make them universal, although virtually all Enlightenment authors believed in God as the creator of the universe and the originator of natural law.

The crucial role of Protestantism

This brings us to the specific context in which human rights emerged, i.e. Protestantism and the period of religious conflicts in Europe. Protestantism played a crucial role in two respects. First, it brought a heightened awareness of the moral status of the individual. The various Reformation movements all agreed that a person does not depend on the institutional church and the sacraments for his or her salvation. By emphasizing the personal responsibility of each person before God, the Protestant faith marked a new phase in concern for each individual's moral state.

Second, Protestantism led *de facto* to a plurality of expressions of the Christian faith in European societies. Besides the Roman Church in the West and the Orthodox Church in the East, there was now a variety of Protestant churches, emerging from several Reformation movements. Along with Lutherans, Calvinists and Zwinglians, there were more radical Reformers who had dissenting or 'non-conformist' views on church order and the Christian life. Some of them practised believers' baptism (for which they were labelled anabaptists or 'rebaptizers').

Could all these churches co-exist? Should this be allowed? If so, to what extent and under which conditions? At that time, religion was not only a matter of personal conviction but a key means of maintaining public order.

Catholics held largely to the model of one church cooperating closely with the political powers. In this model, the unity of religion was considered necessary for social cohesion, so there was no room for alternative forms of Christianity, while Jews were tolerated only within the confines of their marginalized existence. How did Protestants respond to religious plurality? There were three approaches.

7 Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *La refondation du monde* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 89.

The first approach: an established church on a regional basis

It seemed a logical implication of the Protestant faith that people should be allowed the freedom to follow their conscience as far as their religious conviction was concerned. Over and against Catholic princes and prelates, Protestants appealed to their conscience in confessing their reformed views of the church and Christian faith, as Luther did famously at the Diet of Worms. However, many theologians, city magistrates and princes belonging to the so-called mainline Protestant churches found it difficult to grant the same freedom of conscience to adherents of other Protestant confessions. Many Protestant leaders held on to the idea of one society and one church, with the only difference being that the established church should now be Protestant. This model left minimal space for a plurality of confessions. As a result, there was strife and conflict, not only between Protestants and Catholic minorities but also between Protestants of different persuasions. One tragic example was the expulsion of Anabaptists from Bern and Zurich, cities that had opted for the reforms of Zwingli.

The peace treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which put an end to the Thirty Years' War, adopted the same approach: in each of its states, the church of the prince should be the established one (*cuius regio, eius religio*).

The second approach: religious tolerance

Others interpreted the consequences of the insistence on personal responsibility before God by saying that people who disagreed with the established (Catholic or Protestant) church should not be forced to adopt its doctrine and worship practice, and that their own churches should be tolerated, provided that they did not disrupt public order or put the country in danger. These Protestants accepted a certain degree of plurality within the Christian world.

This approach was defended more often by magistrates and princes than by theologians and church leaders. A classic example is Sébastien Castellion, pastor and Bible translator in Geneva. In 1553, Michael Servetus was arrested and brought before the city magistrates because of his views on the Trinity. He was quickly condemned and burned at the stake. During the process, Calvin served as prosecutor and theological expert. In February 1554, Calvin published his 'Declaration to Maintain the True Faith',⁸ in which he argued that it is the duty of the political and judiciary authorities to condemn heretics and have them executed when their heresy is serious and a real danger to public order.

Castellion publicly took issue with Calvin's position and pleaded for tolerance. He published a text in which he criticized the Protestant governors: 'Before they have come to power, they detested the persecutors, but now that they have become strong, they follow the example of persecutors.'⁹ Then he wrote a pamphlet 'against the seditious writing of Calvin'. It was not authorized by the censors, but handwritten copies were distributed secretly.¹⁰ Whereas Calvin stated that right doctrine needs to be

8 Jean Calvin, *Déclaration pour maintenir la vraie foi* (Geneva, 1554).

9 *Traité des Hérétiques*, published under the pseudonym of Basile Montfort (Geneva, 1554), par. 8.

10 Sébastien Castellion, *Contre le libelle de Calvin après la mort de Michel Servet* (1554; current edition Geneva: Éditions Zoé, 1998).

defended, Castellion's response has become famous: 'To kill a man is not defending a doctrine, it is killing a man.'¹¹ He argued that no magistrate has the right to condemn someone to death only for his doctrines. A crime should be punished, but a false doctrine is not a crime. It calls for refutation 'with arguments and writings', not for punishment.

The Servetus case was extreme. Intolerant Protestant magistrates often had dissidents imprisoned, sometimes expelled, but hardly ever executed. But this case brought to light the divergence between two approaches in the Protestant world, one repressive and the other tolerant.

The tolerant approach, of which Castellion was an early example, did not mean total liberty of opinion. Castellion opposed condemning Jews and Muslims but argued that the authorities should sanction 'blasphemous' and 'atheist' persons, although they should not go as far as to put them to death. By 'atheists' he meant people who refuse the elementary rules of moral conduct, as a consequence of not believing in God, the author of the natural law. They should be punished for their actions and their behaviour, according to Castellion. His position is typical of the position that was adopted by other relatively tolerant scholars and governors.

Similar views were presented by the Dutch Catholic writer Coornhert, who quoted Castellion in his *Manifesto against the Execution of Heretics* (1566), and Prince William of Orange, who defended the cause of the Protestants and led the revolt of the Dutch provinces against their Spanish rulers. In the provinces where Calvinism became the privileged religion, other Protestant groups, mostly refugees from other countries, were tolerated in some cities and under certain conditions. Catholics in these provinces could meet only in hidden places. Amsterdam became a haven of refuge for persecuted Protestants, Catholics and Jews alike.

The Hungarian Reformed pastor Ferencz Davidis influenced King John Sigismund of Transylvania to issue the first edict of tolerance in history (1568), granting freedom of worship to all the different Christian confessions in his territory. In 1596, King Henry IV of France issued the famous Edict of Nantes, giving French Protestants freedom of worship and education in a limited number of cities.

The third approach: the Radical Reformation and the call for religious liberty

Tolerance meant freedom in a limited way. It was usually not granted to all, and it did not imply that the tolerated groups were now on equal footing with the dominant group. As a result, the more radical Reformers often paid a heavy price for their convictions. Their leaders, such as John Bunyan, were frequently imprisoned or martyred. Others fled or were forced into exile.

The Radical Reformers went further than tolerance. They called into question the authority of civil authorities and of the established state church in matters of religious opinion and religious practice. In these circles one finds, for the first time in European history, a plea for religious liberty as a universal human right, not only for Christians of different confessions but for all, whatever their religious or non-religious persuasion.

11 Castellion, *Contre le libelle*, par. 14/2, 419.

Thomas Helwys

The Baptist movement in England was one of several dissenting or non-conformist Protestant movements of that time that disagreed with the official Anglican Church in matters of theology, church order and Christian discipline. Baptist Thomas Helwys (c. 1550–1616) fled from persecution to Amsterdam, where he joined the assembly of English refugees. Formed in 1604 and led by pastor John Smyth, this was the first Baptist church in history. In 1611, Helwys wrote the earliest Baptist confession of faith, called *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland*. That same year, he returned to England where he founded the first Baptist church in that country, in Spitafields. Helwys was arrested because of his advocacy for religious liberty for all people regardless of creed. He died in prison in 1616.

In 1612, Helwys published *The Mystery of Iniquity*, which has become a Baptist classic.¹² In this work, amongst other topics, he described the absurdity of coerced uniformity in worship practices, the legitimacy of the state and the proper role of the magistrates, and Jesus Christ as the sole King of the church. The title comes from 2 Thessalonians 2:7 where Paul speaks of ‘the mystery of lawlessness’ (iniquity). For Helwys, this was ‘a working power of Satan’, and he saw this evil especially in the policy of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches that conspired with governments to deny freedom of conscience to those who disagreed with their theology and practices. More generally, the ‘mystery of iniquity’ was ‘the spirit of domination and oppression’.¹³

Not tolerance of some but freedom for all

One of the most important themes in *The Mystery of Iniquity* is religious liberty. In fact, this pamphlet is the first English document in recorded history calling for complete freedom of conscience in matters of religion. Whereas John Smyth, often considered the founder of the Baptist movement, wanted freedom of conscience for all Christians, Helwys claimed it for every human being, including those with whom he found himself in fundamental disagreement, such as Jews, Muslims (‘Turks’) and adherents of any other non-Christian religion:

For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves. The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure. This is made evident to our lord the king by scriptures.¹⁴

Helwys had the audacity to send a personal, autographed copy to James I, king of England and Scotland from 1603 to 1625. On a handwritten page, he reminded the monarch that he too was a mortal being, ‘dust and ashes’, with no power over the immortal souls of his subjects:

12 Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1611/1612), ed. Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

13 Helwys, *A Short Declaration*, 26.

14 Helwys, *A Short Declaration*, 57.

I ask whether there be so unjust a thing and of so great cruel tyranny under the sun as to force men's consciences in their religion to God, seeing that if they err, they must pay the price of their transgressions with the loss of their souls. Oh, let the king judge, is it not most equal [fair] that men should choose their religion themselves, seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgement seat of God to answer for themselves, when it shall be no excuse for them to say we were commanded or compelled to be of this religion by the king or by them that had authority from him?¹⁵

King James reacted by having Helwys put in prison as soon as he set his feet on English soil again.

For Helwys, religious liberty was a right for everyone and no parliament had the right to legislate against it. No monarch could overrule it. His ideas predated the thinking of John Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers by almost a century!

Argumentation

Helwys and other early Baptists framed their arguments in the familiar language of two swords: the sword wielded by the civil authorities and that of the ecclesial authorities. They insisted that the king's authority and power are limited to civil affairs, and that any attempt to legislate beyond those bounds, particularly in matters pertaining to the soul, infringes upon what belongs solely to God. That is, for the king to compel religious belief is to usurp not just the rights of the autonomous human individual, but finally also the sovereignty of God.

Jason Whitt has summarized the arguments of English Baptists for religious liberty. The key point at issue for them was salvation. They advanced two arguments. The first was the hope that all persons who might be saved would be saved:

Baptist leaders sought to convince the English authorities, both civil and ecclesial, that the proper concern for Christians is the salvation of all those who would come to Christ. To punish non-believers by exclusion from the public life of the nation, or to inflict on them torture or death because they would not believe (or believed wrongly), is counter to the very purpose of Christ who is willing to hold off judgment to the end.¹⁶

Second, enforced conformity to a certain church actually works contrary to the purposes of God, because it leads people to adopt the practices and rites outwardly, without inner faith conviction. Helwys argues that conformance without real conversion 'fails to bring salvation', that it leads to superficial faith, and that it fosters hypocrisy.

Third, Helwys expresses the concern that in any country where faith is enforced under the threat of persecution, people who are not of the faith will avoid that realm. As a result, in such a land there will be no opportunities for true evangelistic witness.¹⁷

15 Helwys, *A Short Declaration*, 37.

16 Jason D. Whitt, 'The Baptist Contribution to Liberty', *Freedom* (journal of the Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University), 2011: 38.

17 Whitt, 'The Baptist Contribution to Liberty', 38.

Richard Overton

The second precursor I will feature is Richard Overton (c. 1597–1663). In his study of the heritage of early Baptist movements, Glen Stassen observed that ‘the story of Richard Overton’s development of the concept of human rights is surprisingly unknown.’¹⁸

Overton may have become an Anglican priest (of the Puritan party). In 1615, he left for Amsterdam where he joined the Baptist congregation originally led by John Smyth, just after it had merged with the Waterland Mennonites upon Smyth’s death in 1612. Overton also spent some time in Germany around the outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648). This experience left him with a profound and passionate hatred for religiously inspired violence.

Despite some claims that Overton had dubious theological views,¹⁹ he remained a faithful member of the General Baptist Congregation in London for the rest of his life. During the English Civil War (1625–1649), Overton became one of the best-known representatives of the Levellers movement, laying out a vision of radical democracy, social equality and religious freedom. In his pamphlets, he pleaded for universal (male) suffrage, a government that was responsive to the people and the common good, and the right of every citizen to petition Parliament and to participate in government regardless of his religion.

Overton was arrested for his views, but thanks to a sustained campaign of petitioning he was released. He then became involved in conspiracies against the government and had to flee to Amsterdam in 1655. The plots came to nothing, and Overton returned to England. Details of his later life are uncertain.

‘Father of human rights’

Like Helwys before him, Overton pleaded for complete religious liberty, not only for non-conformist and Anabaptist groups to which he belonged, but also for Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims. Overton is sometimes called ‘the father of human rights’, because he was the first person in history to explicitly use this term and to develop the concept.²⁰ He speaks of ‘the rights of men’ in *The Arraignment of Mr. Persecution* (1642), an allegory in which the personification of ‘persecution for the cause of conscience’ is tried and convicted of thousands of deaths, wars and other evils. Overton’s most important book was *An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny* (1646), which contains the following famous quotation:

No man has power my right and liberties, and I over no man’s. I may be but an individual, enjoy myself and my self-property, and may right myself no more

18 Glen Harold Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 141.

19 In *Man’s Mortalitie* (1644), Overton argued that the human soul as well as the body is subject to death, but that both will be resurrected at the last judgement. This belief was widespread among General Baptists but denounced as heretical by Presbyterians.

20 Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*, 148, 153; David N. Stamos, *Myth of Universal Human Rights: Its Origin, History, and Explanation, along with a More Humane Way* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 155.

than myself, or presume any further; if I do, I am an encroacher and an invader upon another man's right—to which I have no right.²¹

In *An Appeal to the Free People* (1647), Overton set forth a doctrine of what he called 'our natural human rights and freedoms'. For him, this concept included not only religious and civil liberties but also the right to basic needs such as free education, housing and free trade.²²

David Stamos credits Overton with presenting 'arguably the first clear expression of human rights as universal, plural, equal, innate, and inalienable'.²³ Baptist theologian Stassen concludes that what Overton wrote 'still fits what most Church denominations have said when they have affirmed human rights'.²⁴ All this happened more than 50 years before John Locke and the English Enlightenment proposed narrower versions of the idea.

Argumentation

According to Overton, human rights are part of human nature and therefore inalienable: 'No one can deprive someone from his human rights. For as by nature no man may abuse, beat, torment, or afflict himself, so by nature no man may give that power to another, seeing he may not do it to himself.'²⁵

His doctrine of human rights was based first on the biblical doctrine that all humans are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27). Part of the doctrine of creation is the concept of natural law, meaning that as a creature of God man is endowed with a conscience, or an awareness of fundamental notions of good and evil. What the Creator requires of man is, to a certain extent, written in his heart. In Protestantism, especially Calvinism, this has served as a basis for legislation and civil order, since all citizens can and should be held accountable when they infringe the moral law. The Leveller movement and other Protestants went a step further and linked the doctrine of creation to natural *rights*. Overton wrote:

For by natural birth all men are equally and alike born to like propriety, liberty and freedom; and as we are delivered of God by the hand of nature into his world, everyone with a natural innate freedom and propriety—as it were writ in the table of every man's heart, never to be obliterated—even so are we to live, everyone equally and alike to enjoy his birth right and privilege; even all whereof God by nature has made him free.²⁶

In the words of William Haller, the well-known historian of Puritanism and one of the few scholars to pay adequate attention to Overton and his contemporaries, 'The task of turning the statement of the law of nature into a ringing declaration of the rights of man fell to Richard Overton.'²⁷

21 Richard Overton, *An Arrow Against All Tyrants and Tyranny*, par. 55.

22 Glen Harold Stassen, 'What Baptists Need to Know about Their Human-Rights Heritage', presentation at the annual gathering of the Baptist World Alliance, Santiago, Chile, 2012.

23 Stamos, *Myth of Universal Rights*, 156.

24 Stassen, 'What Baptists Need to Know'.

25 *An Appeal to the Free People*, quoted by Stamos, *Myth of Universal Rights*, 156.

26 *An Appeal to the Free People*, quoted by Stamos, *Myth of Universal Rights*, 156.

27 Quoted by Stassen, *Just Peacemaking*, 141.

Second, Overton based his idea of human rights on the doctrine of salvation, stating that since Jesus Christ died for all humankind, no one should be prevented or discouraged from responding to the offer of salvation. This argument parallels that put forward by Thomas Helwys and other early Baptists.

Third, Overton appealed to the example of Jesus and the moral teaching of the New Testament. 'Jesus made disciples by teaching, not by coercion', so Christian magistrates should refrain from using force in matters of religious persuasion. Overton also referred to Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds that grow up side by side (Mt 13:24–30) to conclude that those who are considered 'weeds' should not be uprooted by force and violence.

Roger Williams

Whereas Helwys and Overton belonged to the General Baptists and had an Arminian theological outlook, Roger Williams (1603–1683) belonged to the Particular Baptists, whose theological framework was Calvinistic. In 1630, he sailed to the colony of Massachusetts Bay, where he hoped to find the religious freedom that was so lacking in Europe. He seems to have been influenced by Overton, since the two corresponded for many years.

The Puritans who had founded Massachusetts aspired to fuse political and religious authority. Roger Williams was different. He objected to taking land from Native Americans, and he insisted on separation from the Church of England and from all rituals inherited from it. He also disliked the way in which these beliefs were enforced by a government that combined religious and political authority into one.

Williams held meetings in his home to spread his opinions. For this, he was forced to leave Massachusetts. In 1636, Williams and his companions bought land from the indigenous Indian population and founded the city of Providence, which became the centre of the colony of Rhode Island. In 1638, he and others founded the first Baptist church in what would become the United States.

Williams took care to build a strong architecture of free thinking in the colony of Rhode Island. Thanks to his influential friends in London, he obtained a royal charter for the colony. The two basic principles inscribed in the charter that distinguished Rhode Island from the other colonies, and from any other country at that time, were the freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state. In adopting these principles, Williams accepted religious plurality as a given reality.

Rhode Island became a haven of refuge for groups that were persecuted elsewhere, including Quakers and Jews. The welcome granted to non-Christian Indians in his colony was exceptional in New England. In one of his letters (1670), to a governor of Connecticut, he wrote that 'there is no prudent Christian way of preserving peace in the world but by permission of differing consciences.'

Williams was a prolific writer. His most important work was *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* (1644), in which he affirmed:

Enforced uniformity confounds civic and religious liberty and the principles of Christianity and civility. No man shall be required to worship or to maintain a worship against his will. ... Men's conscience ought in no sort to be violated, urged, or constrained. And whenever men have attempted anything by this

violent course, whether openly or by secret means, the issue has been pernicious and ridiculous.

To make the point even stronger, he added that 'forced worship stinks in God's nostrils.'

Argumentation

Williams based his case for religious liberty and other universal civil rights on both pragmatic and theological considerations. First, he observed that most wars were caused by religious oppression. (Keep in mind that he lived in a time when Europe was ravaged by religious wars.) Williams contended that if nations would establish the right of everyone to religious liberty, this would take away one of the major reasons to wage wars.

Second, he pointed out, like Overton, that religious pressure is counterproductive. Although its objective is to promote the 'true religion', it incites people to hypocrisy. They will pretend to embrace a certain religion to prevent persecution, even if they are not convinced in their conscience.

Third, Williams cited the example of Jesus Christ who commanded his disciples by teaching and persuasion, not coercion.

All these arguments were widely used by Baptists and dissenters of his time.²⁸ His main theological argument was the idea of natural law. Here he distinguished himself from his contemporaries by offering a new perspective.²⁹ Like Calvin, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay and other Calvinists, Williams argued that all human beings might justly be held to account for transgressing the 'natural' law of 'humanity' and 'civility', whether they had heard of and accepted Christianity or not, for this law is written in their conscience. The same principles are revealed more fully in the Bible. People have a natural right to follow these principles even if this goes against the requirements of certain rulers ('tyrants') who force people to act contrary to this natural law. For Williams, 'the idea of natural rights was not derived specifically from Christian revelation, but from an understanding of human nature itself as rational, self-aware and morally responsible.'³⁰

Natural law is the basis of natural rights and freedoms, and therefore also the basis of civil government. The latter should guarantee 'the free exercise and enjoyment of all their civil rights and religious rights'. The problem for Williams was that Calvinists often went well beyond this standard. They claimed that their version of 'orthodox' Christianity was indispensable to the security and prosperity of the state and that, therefore, citizens could be punished not just for violating a moral code

28 See Glen Harold Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 199.

29 This summary is based largely on the description in David Little, *Essays on Religion and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 267ff. See also the excellent study by Summer Twiss, 'Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience and Religion as a Natural Right', in *Religion and Public Policy: Human Rights, Conflict, and Ethics*, ed. Summer Twiss, Marian Simion and Rodney Petersen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21–44.

30 Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law and Church Law, 1150–1625* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1997), 76, quoted by Little, *Essays on Religion and Human Rights*, 279.

commonly accessible to human beings as such but also for transgressing what Calvinists thought were the clear teachings of the Lord Jesus.³¹

Williams found that this approach caused a catastrophe for both religious and civil communities. He affirmed that 'political power, might or authority is not religious, Christian, etc. but natural, human and civil.'³² He added:

There is a moral virtue, a moral fidelity, ability and honesty, which other men (beside Church members) are, by good nature and education, by good laws and good examples nourished and trained up in, that civil places of trust and credit need not be monopolised into the hands of Church members (who sometimes are not fitted for them) and all others deprived and despoiled of their natural and civil rights and liberties.³³

Basic to Williams's approach is the protection of 'the natural and civil rights and liberties of all citizens'.³⁴ These include property, political participation, legal protection and especially religious freedom or freedom of conscience.

'A wall of separation'

Williams was the first to draw the conclusion that religious liberty implies the non-interference of the state in religious matters: 'The state has no authority to govern the spiritual and Christian commonweal, the flock and church of Christ, to pull down or set up religion, to judge, determine, or punish in spiritual controversies.'³⁵ He argued that religious and political institutions should respect the 'wall of separation' between them:

When they [the church] have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the Church and the wilderness of the world, God hath ever broke down the wall itself, removed the Candlestick ... and made His Garden a wilderness as it is this day. And that therefore, if He will please to restore His garden and Paradise again, it must of necessity be walled in peculiarity unto Himself from the world.³⁶

This idea and this expression have found acceptance much later under the title of 'separation of church and state'.

At the same time, Christians should submit to civil governors who are responsible for civil peace and order:

In all cases wherein civility is wronged in regard to the bodies and goods of any, cases of public safety, peace, and common rights, as well as religiously sanctioned human sacrifices. In all such cases the civil sword is God's sword for suppressing

31 Little, *Essays on Religion and Human Rights*, 269.

32 Roger Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 3:398.

33 Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 4:365.

34 Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, in *Complete Writings*, 4:414.

35 Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, in *Complete Writings*, 4:366.

36 Roger Williams, 'Mr. Cotton's Letter Lately Printed, Examined and Answered', in *Complete Writings*, 1:243.

such practices and appearances, including the very principles on which they rest.³⁷

In defining the relationship between religious freedom and civil power, Roger Williams was far ahead of his time.

Influence: three historical lines

From the Baptist precursors onwards, we can trace three historical lines of influence.

The first was in England. Helwys and Overton died before they could witness the realization of their ideas. Some four decades later, in 1688, William of Orange, the Protestant prince of the Netherlands, became king. His coronation is known as the Glorious Revolution, because it led to religious tolerance between Catholics and Protestants. In 1689, William issued a Bill of Rights guaranteeing a number of civil rights to all citizens of the kingdom. In the following year, John Locke published his famous *Two Treatises of Government*, in which he argued that 'all government is limited in its powers and exists only by the consent of the governed.' His basic argument was that 'all men are born free.'³⁸ Clearly, what Locke could now write under peaceful circumstances had already been set forth by others before him in the turmoil of persecution, imprisonment and expulsion.

The second line leads to the American revolution. Roger Williams's plea for religious liberty and civil rights influenced not only John Locke but also other Baptist leaders and Enlightenment philosophers in America during the 18th century. Although we cannot say with certainty that the founding fathers of the United States directly quoted the Rhode Island Charter when they were discussing the text of the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the Constitution, this charter did furnish an example of a colony that could function well and even prosper without an established religion.

The third line can be drawn on the European continent, particularly in France where Enlightenment philosophers spoke out against the oppression of Protestants and advocated for a new political regime that would guarantee fundamental civil rights. They were certainly familiar with the call for religious liberty in the English-speaking world and with Williams specifically. Although they inspired the political changes of the French Revolution in 1789, a Reformed pastor, Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne, played a key role, first in drafting the Edict of Tolerance issued by King Louis XVI in 1786, and then in drafting the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, adopted by the National Assembly just months after the French Revolution.

Conclusions and a question for today

What can we conclude from the history of early Baptists and their three main representatives, as far as the plea for religious freedom is concerned?

37 Roger Williams, *The Examiner Defended*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 7:243.

38 Michal Shortall, *Human Rights and Moral Reasoning: A Comparative Investigation by Way of Three Theorists and Their Respective Traditions of Enquiry: John Finnis, Ronald Dworkin and Jürgen Habermas* (Rome: Gregorian Biblical Book Shop, 2009), 88.

Religions liberty, the 'mother of human rights'. Freedom of conscience has been called the 'mother of human rights', and rightly so, because historically speaking this was the first civil right to be put forward as a universal right for all men, who are created in the image of the one Creator.

The idea of legally guaranteed human civil rights is of religious origin. More specifically, it is of Baptist origin. The early Baptists held the religious conviction that all men are equal in the sight of God and endowed with equal human rights, but they made it into a secular principle for all of society. As Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, Overton, the Levellers and non-conformist Protestants 'expressed, for the first time in history, secular concepts of freedom and equality which break with all traditional forms of social hierarchy. ... This is Christianity's chief seventeenth-century achievement.'³⁹

'Separation', a religious conviction, became a secular principle. When the Baptists pleaded for the separation of church and state, their purpose was to keep the church free from political interests, but this was at the same time a principle that should limit the power of governors and subject them to universal moral principles. In short, they found a way to turn their religious conviction into a principle that could be applied to the governance of society. In the 18th century, Enlightenment philosophers formulated the same principle, but they gave it a secular, rational basis. It would be interesting to consider to what extent they were inspired by the leaders of persecuted Protestant minorities as they advocated for the separation of political power and religious institutions. As far as I know, this question has not attracted much historical research.

A foundational value for a plural society—not pluralism. Helwys, Overton, Williams and their fellow advocates for religious liberty were the first to fully accept the *fact* of a plural society. This is not the same as pluralism, i.e. recognizing multiple different views as equally true. Differences in theology and church practice really did matter to them. They did not accept other religions as viable ways to salvation. They believed in proclaiming God's word and calling people to conversion. But they were persuaded that ecclesiastical and political rulers should refrain from enforcing uniformity. People of other religious persuasions should have the same rights as we have. This principle enables a plural society to live in peace.

What will happen when the religious foundations are lost? The preceding conclusion leads me to a final remark. What will happen to human rights when the religious foundations are lost out of sight or denied? Can there be another foundation for human dignity that does not take religious views into account? What will happen in the long run when a secularist worldview takes over? Can such a worldview safeguard respect for the sacred and for human life in all its stages? We already see the tendency in a secularist worldview to make human rights a slogan for the individual freedom to do what you want, without being bothered by others. Is such an individualist ethic sustainable? What philosophical basis can safeguard human dignity and human rights, if it is devoid of any transcendent divine reality? Will the idea of universal rights not fall victim to pluralism and relativism under which every culture,

39 Alisdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 1998 edition, 144.

every country or even every individual can formulate his or her version of these rights?

Today, the question of religious or non-religious foundations of human rights is being widely discussed. We need to recall the historical roots of human rights and listen to our precursors in order to remain connected with the biblical values that were their source of inspiration, especially the biblical view of man. They remain a solid foundation and the safest guide for the future.

James McClendon's Theology of Culture and Its Implications for Cultural Engagement

Timoteo D. Gener

In this essay, a leading Filipino theologian reviews the work of James McClendon, including his interaction with Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr and others, as a means of shedding light on the church's opportunities for cultural transformation. Specific applications to the Philippine setting provide a model for applications in other contexts.

In this study, I explore the theology of culture developed by James William McClendon, Jr., particularly the way in which he envisions the interaction of religion, culture and the church. His work addresses crucial themes such as the church's role in cultural transformation. I draw on his ideas to propose a viable theory of religion and culture for the Philippine church setting. I focus on the Philippines because that is the culture I know most thoroughly, but I believe that the theory can be applied in other contexts.

First, I will review the influence of well-known theologian Paul Tillich's ideas on McClendon. I then consider how McClendon's insights go beyond Tillich's contributions.¹ Finally, I turn to implications for Philippine cultural and theological engagement.

McClendon's key ideas: religion as convictional, church as exemplar

McClendon invokes Tillich's notion of religion as a dimension of culture. Tillich is one of three thinkers whom McClendon examines on his way to situating his own standpoint. (The other two are Julian Hartt and John Howard Yoder.)

Timoteo Gener (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is president and professor of theology at FEBIAS College of Bible, Manila, Philippines. He is the general editor of *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Publishing, 2019).

1 For Tillich, the main focus will be his *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) and his seminal 1919 essay, 'On the Idea of a Theology of Culture', in Victor Nuovo, *Visionary Science: A Translation of Tillich's "On the Idea of a Theology of Culture" with an Interpretive Essay* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987). My interpretation of McClendon relies primarily on his three volumes of systematic theology: *Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), *Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996) and *Witness* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000).

Convictions and religion

Although he is critical of Tillich's monolithic understanding of culture, McClendon fully agrees with Tillich that cultures have various religious shapes and, consequently, that religions assume a variety of cultural shapes.² Moreover, Tillich's understanding of religion as ultimate concern would find affinity with McClendon's notion of religion as a convictional matter, i.e. that religion is best understood through the understanding of believers' religious convictions.³ Indeed, the focus on convictions could illumine the dimension of ultimacy in cultural life. McClendon would insist, however, that the convictional route presents itself as a better way to understand religion.⁴ It is more concrete than ultimate concern as it is accessible through the study of religious language among communities, whereas Tillich's ideational construct tends towards ambiguity.⁵

The yes and no

Another critical element in Tillich's theology that McClendon finds attractive is the dialectic of acceptance and rejection. This dialectical principle characterizes Tillich's vision of an open, 'theonomous philosophy'.⁶ Graham Morbey traces the philosophical roots of Tillich's dialectics and delineates how it functions in his theological system:

The dialectical form of Tillich's thought goes back to the original form of all dialectics—an actual dialogue of question and answer, of yes and no. A similar dialectics, [Tillich] contends, takes place in reality which does not merely remain identical with itself but alters or changes. The basic scheme of dialectics is 'the movement of life from self-identity to self-alteration and back to self'.⁷ Life processes in general, the structure of historical events, the symbolic descriptions of the divine life—all are dialectical. Dialectical thinking does not reflect on reality from the outside but enters into reality itself and participates in its actual tensions.⁸

In McClendon's vision, the 'yes and no' of Tillich is disengaged from its speculative philosophical roots.⁹ Instead, McClendon relates it to the gospel—'God's judging and redeeming word' in Christ which is 'not a simple no or yes to ... 'religion' [or

2 McClendon, *Witness*, 57, 63, 97.

3 James William McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1975), 3. See also the 1994 edition, 419–24, and Tilley Terrence, 'In Favor of a "Practical Theory of Religion"', in *Theology without Foundations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994).

4 McClendon, *Convictions* (1994), 419–24. See also Nancey Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1996), 110–34.

5 See William Rowe, *Religious Symbols and God: A Philosophical Study of Tillich's Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

6 Graham E. Morbey, 'Paul Tillich', in *Bringing into Captivity Every Thought: Capita Selecta in the History of Christian Evaluations of Non-Christian Philosophy*, ed. Jacob Klapwijk, Sander Griffioen and Gerben Groenewoud (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 200.

7 Morbey here quotes Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963), 350.

8 Morbey, 'Paul Tillich', 200.

9 McClendon, *Witness*, 38, 73.

any form of Christian cultural existence] but declares a simultaneous yes and no'.¹⁰ This leads to the discussion of normativity in McClendon's theology of culture.

The primacy of discipleship

McClendon subjects Tillich's notion of religion and culture to gospel discipleship. This is true as well with his appropriation of Hartt and Yoder's theological insights. Indeed, for McClendon, discipleship for the sake of the gospel is the norm for the theology of culture. Notice how this shines through when he summarizes his theology in dialogue not just with Tillich but with Hartt and Yoder as well:

Many others have made and continue to make valuable contributions to a Christian theology of culture. This section has traced an overlooked but enormously important line of direction: from Tillich to Hartt to Yoder. Were not such summaries misleadingly concise, I might risk saying that while Tillich focused upon culture itself as the bearer of meaning, Hartt shifted the focus to the gospel addressed to that culture, and Yoder refocused upon the gospel-embodying practices of the church. These theologians offer a continuity that brings us to the present—where all their gains may be retrieved. I have spoken of this combination as a trajectory; consider it now as a three-stranded cord in which the whole is stronger than any of its contributing parts. This is the cord I mean to extend if I can. *The present line will acknowledge God's positive command expressed in the long narrative of the Jews as it climaxes in Jesus and as it is echoed in the church's enculturated (i.e., new-culture-based and old-culture-remaking) witness.* In *transmitting* this Great Story, the church must be alert to openings, hungers, hidden religious depths within the contemporary culture (thus Tillich). Even more must it become aware *by the light of that long narrative* of the illusions and self-deceit of the culture-world, so that its preaching enables the world rightly to see itself (thus Hartt). This strategy demands afresh that the church *practice the gospel* it preaches. The church must be not only the preacher but also the present instance of the gospel of Jesus Christ (thus Yoder). (emphasis added)¹¹

The church in the theology of culture

As the church (the people of God) is integral to the gospel story, so ecclesiology assumes a central place in McClendon's theology of culture. On one hand, McClendon is explicit that his starting point is ecclesiology.¹² Theology of culture is first of all about the church's role in the world. On the other hand, the church embodies the hope of a transformed culture. The social practice of the church should be the example of the gospel norm (Jesus Christ) in the surrounding culture.¹³

The church as starting point

When McClendon says that ecclesiology is the proper starting point for the theology of culture, he is saying, first of all, that a Christian approach to culture means the

10 McClendon, *Witness*, 73.

11 McClendon, *Witness*, 49.

12 McClendon, *Witness*, 18.

13 McClendon, *Witness*, 55.

examination of the *church's stance* vis-à-vis culture. McClendon calls this a third 'angle of vision on the people of God'.¹⁴ Recalling the thrust of his first volume on systematic theology, *Ethics*, the first angle looks at the church and asks the question of how the church must *live* to be the church. The second angle, represented by his work *Doctrine*, focuses on the theme of what the church must *teach* to be the church. Finally, the theology of culture as a third angle of vision on the church answers the question of where and how the church must *stand* to be the church.¹⁵ The volumes in McClendon's systematics are closely interrelated. For him, the actual life and teaching of the church then and now (the first two angles of vision) serve as the fundamental horizon for discerning the role of the (contemporary) church in God's kingdom today.

On this question of starting point, McClendon registers disagreement with H. Richard Niebuhr's famous typology of Christian relations with culture.¹⁶ He does not claim 'that the effort is useless', and McClendon also has good things to say about Niebuhr's concern, 'but perhaps ... the starting point [of his venture] was incorrect'.¹⁷ Niebuhr's sociological typology presupposed 'an authoritative realm independent of Christ and over against Christ and thus caricatured every position save the one toward which he finally tilts, in which that original allowance was overcome'.¹⁸ According to McClendon, Niebuhr's answer to the question of church-world relations

is found in an *Aristotelean golden mean*, where extremes are the rejection of 'culture' by 'Christ' (minimal interaction, an extreme imputed by Niebuhr to our own baptist heritage!) and identification ('the Christ of culture', attributed to liberal culture-Protestantism), and where the happiest form of the *happy mean* is an interaction called 'transformation': 'Christ' transforming 'culture', not vice versa.¹⁹

In this process of reflection, McClendon contends, Niebuhr has devalued the role of the whole church. For one, Niebuhr's 'golden mean' is independent of Christ and his body. For another, while it may not have been Niebuhr's intention, the typology has tended to divide rather than unite the churches.²⁰

McClendon's interaction with Niebuhr is not a digression from engagement with Tillich's theology of culture. This is so because Tillich and Niebuhr are both indebted to Ernst Troeltsch in their understanding of the church-world

14 McClendon, *Witness*, 10.

15 McClendon, *Witness*, 18.

16 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

17 McClendon, *Witness*, 35. The positive comments appear in James McClendon, 'Three Strands of Christian Ethics', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 68.

18 McClendon, 'Three Strands of Christian Ethics', 68.

19 McClendon, *Systematic Theology: Ethics*, 230.

20 McClendon, 'Three Strands of Christian Ethics', 68. Niebuhr's weak ecclesiology in *Christ and Culture* was also noted by both John Howard Yoder and Glen Stassen. See Glen Stassen and D. M. Yeager (eds.), *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

relationship.²¹ In fact, voicing a critique similar to McClendon's view of Niebuhr, Ronald Modras faults Tillich for his weak, ahistorical ecclesiology.²²

Church and world in light of the gospel

McClendon believes that Jesus' parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3b–10, 37–38) addresses the church-gospel-world triad.²³ This is a further instance where McClendon subjects theology of culture to the word of Christ.

The sower is the Son of Man—a biblical image referring to the Messiah Jesus and his band of followers. Jesus Christ, however, is the eschatological judge, both of the earth and of his assembled followers. The field is the world—the human scene which is the arena for cultural formation. It could be an arena for kingdom harvest or for barrenness. The good seed represents the children of light, in whom the gospel springs up easily. The weeds represent children of the evil one, enemies of God (perhaps in disguise) who gobble up the gospel.

In light of the parable, McClendon concludes that the 'fertility' of the church's stance is measured by the gospel of the Kingdom. Moreover, the central question the parable poses to the church is this: 'What must a contemporary culture be in order to lie fallow to the Gospel of Jesus Christ?'²⁴ Implicit in the question is McClendon's claim that the church is responsible for preparing a welcoming soil (culture) for the gospel. The church must not only proclaim the good news of the Kingdom; it must live out this message and be an exemplar for the sake of the healing of nations. Here the gardener's image of 'soil amendment' is offered as a useful metaphor. While not abandoning its missional identity in Christ, the church should help to improve the condition of ('amend') the soil so that it may 'lie fallow to the Gospel of Jesus Christ'.²⁵

One can discern from McClendon's exposition of the parable the interconnections of the church, gospel and world. Theology of culture concerns itself with the church's stance towards the world (culture). The church's service to the world is to contribute towards the redemption of culture by proclaiming the gospel. Although the church itself cannot redeem culture, it prepares the way for the fruitfulness of Christ's reign. To prepare the way for the gospel is not simply a one-way movement from church to culture. Rather, the church, world and gospel are always related to one another, and 'the task [is] to recognize *their mutual involvement*, sorting out the contemporary living gospel whose "preachability" would shape the church and inform the world for the sake of the kingdom of God.'²⁶

McClendon also discusses Paul's image of law as 'slave' (Gal 3:24; 4:2), which is a startling choice since Paul was familiar with other more exalted Hellenistic images (e.g. teacher). Since Jewish law is a form of education (the enculturation of

21 Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, x; Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl Braaten (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 530.

22 Ronald Modras, *Paul Tillich's Theology of the Church: A Catholic Appraisal* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976).

23 Some parts of this discussion of McClendon are derived from his original lectures at Fuller Seminary in 1999. I attended those lectures as one of his students.

24 McClendon, *Witness*, 61.

25 McClendon, *Witness*, 61.

26 Cf. Julian Hartt's insights as appropriated by McClendon, *Witness*, 42.

individuals to Jewish society), 'law' could be equated with culture. Thus one could say that culture for Paul is not a teacher but a slave. It should help to lead us to Christ, but it can never take the place of the gospel or the church. McClendon contrasts Jesus' and Paul's image of culture as soil and slave with the modern image of culture as educator. In the likes of German Enlightenment thinker G. E. Lessing (whose ideas were also appropriated by Tillich), culture, instead of being examined to see whether it is biblical soil, takes on a sense of finality or ultimacy apart from biblical faith.²⁷ Tillich, following Lessing and the Enlightenment tradition, links culture and education very strongly. The role of education, in Tillich's theology of culture, receives gospel-like emphasis but without any biblical connection. Indeed, the aims of education—acquisition of technique, enculturation, and humanization—become ends in themselves apart from the gospel of Christ. In the end, rational civilization serves as the norm, reigning over both culture and religion.

Reflections and implications

Clarifying religion

According to Mercado, 'the Philippine languages have no original or non-loaned words for "religion."²⁸ Maggay accounts for this reality as follows: '[The Filipino] sees himself as part of the cosmic whole ... participating in and not reflecting upon the world.'²⁹ Emerita Quito's explanation parallels Maggay's. According to her, in the Philippines as in all of Asia, 'religion is a way of life that is to be revered.'³⁰

My first reaction to McClendon's proposal to understand religion in terms of convictions is that it could lead towards a fuller articulation of Filipino religious loyalties at the same time that it is open to understanding the realm of the mysterious. (The latter concept, an openness to mystery, could also be seen as present in Tillich's view of religion, but his idealist framework leads to abstraction, ambiguity and even dualism.) In the descriptions of religion in the Philippines cited above, reverence towards religion tends to get in the way of actually reflecting on and engaging the power of such fundamental beliefs. Aside from the usefulness of McClendon's method in understanding religion(s), it also has the advantage of possible rootedness in the vernacular; *pananalig* and *paninindigan* are dynamic equivalent terms for 'conviction'. Moreover, because its stress is on the analysis of convictional language from within (religious) communities, McClendon's practical theory of religion is not impositional but rather invitational in its thrust. Being inviting rather than imposing is critical, especially since Filipinos have had a bitter experience with colonialism.

Finally, in delineating the religious dimension in culture and the cultural shape of religion, both McClendon and Tillich have opened up the meaning of religion not just with reference to particular religious traditions among communities (e.g.

27 Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 146–57.

28 Leonardo Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Theology* (Tacloban City, Philippines: Divine Word Press, 1975), 26.

29 Melba Maggay, *The Gospel in Filipino Context* (Manila: OMF Publishers, 1987), 15.

30 Emerita Quito, *The Merging Philosophy of East and West* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991), 6–7.

Christianity, Islam) but also to the reality of existing ideologies and worldviews (e.g. modernity, nationalism).

Theological assessment of culture

McClendon's work makes it clear that insight into the church-gospel-world triad is central to a viable theology of culture in any context. I have not yet seen any Filipino theologian explicitly apply a theological analysis of this triad to the Philippine situation. The rightful place of 'method' in theology of culture seems to be explication and analysis of this triad. I first came across a similar structure of this triad in Newbigin's missionary theology.³¹ Newbigin proposes that from a missionary point of view, the cultural context opened up by the encounter between the gospel and culture involves the continuous interaction of three basic factors: the gospel, a particular culture and the church.³² Georg Hunsberger develops, via a diagram, Newbigin's three-cornered pattern of relationship and calls it 'A Triangular Model of Gospel-Culture Relationships'.³³ Jonathan Wilson explicates Julian Hartt's triadic analysis and also notes that other theologians of culture, such as Robert Schreiter and Francis Watson, work with something similar to Hartt's triad.³⁴

One observes, however, a lack of deeper (biblical) engagement of the core themes of creation and new creation in McClendon's explication of this triad and his theology as a whole. This gap is noticeable in his (baptistic?) views on Christology, ecclesiology and the kingdom of God, as well as in how he treats the Great Story of the Bible. For instance, creation is not foundational in his rethinking of plurality (his notion of 'powers') in society as well as the direction of the kingdom, present and future.³⁵ The unfolding New Order (new creation) centres on the 'power of the way of Jesus ... echoed in the church's enculturated (i.e., new-culture-based and old-culture-remaking) witness'.³⁶ Rather than a positive conception, *creation as soiled by sin* and needing redemption through the church's witness to Jesus Christ (especially through suffering) seems to predominate in McClendon's theology of culture and the world.³⁷

A deeper engagement of the themes of creation and new creation alongside that of redemption would have been a helpful step towards a full-orbed understanding of revelation and salvation. For scriptural revelation (or the Great Story) involves

31 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 164–75.

32 Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 168.

33 Georg Hunsberger, 'The Newbigin Gauntlet: Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America', in *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*, ed. George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 7–10.

34 Jonathan Wilson, *Theology as Cultural Critique: The Achievement of Julian Hartt* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 11, n. 26.

35 James William McClendon, 'Social Action for Radical Christians: Analysis and Program', *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 12, no. 3 (December 1989): 257–59.

36 McClendon, *Witness*, 49.

37 McClendon, *Witness*, 55.

creation, wisdom and culture,³⁸ and the very foundation of redemption in Scripture is creation and its renewal, even if redemption focuses on the Christ-event as key.³⁹

Theology of culture in action

It is impressive to observe how McClendon actually put his theology of culture to work. In the end, it is 'by their fruits that you shall know them' (Mt 7:15–20). Or, to say it more crudely, the fruit of the pudding is in the eating. The lessons to be learned from McClendon's actual practice are of great significance for the Philippine situation, especially with regard to engaging modernization and the persistence of indigenous religions.

As for engaging modernity and modernization, as per McClendon's assessment, Tillich's application of his theology of culture with regard to education is a prime example of the liberal predisposition of the method of theological correlation or synthesis. As he has neglected the revelatory significance of the church in the world, Tillich's exposition has also tended to endorse the Enlightenment project and the resulting Western civilization as the norm for religion and culture. Thus, though others have hailed Tillich's humanistic vision of theonomous synthesis as a fruit of his sensitive correlation,⁴⁰ one could charge him with not really listening deeply to the signs of the times. Newbigin, for instance, argues that the secularity of the Western culture drives any 'religion' to the margins so that *simply* adopting a listening mode relative to modern culture would be self-defeating.⁴¹ Or in less radical fashion, what the church needs to accentuate in engaging Western culture is not more efforts on cultural synthesis but rather a greater demand for prophetic discipleship.⁴²

Among McClendon's case studies in theology of culture is his engagement with Navajo traditional religion.⁴³ This example seems most relevant for theological re-rooting in the Philippines. First, aside from the many similarities between Navajo and Philippine traditional cultures, this example addresses the problem of continuity and discontinuity between Christian faith and indigenous religions, a problem

38 William A. Dyrness, *Facts on the Ground: A Wisdom Theology of Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022).

39 Cf. Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 73–90.

40 Raymond Bulman, *A Blueprint for Humanity: Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1984).

41 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1989). I am indebted to the late George Vandervelde of the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, for our interactions on this particular point. Newbigin's contextual alternative (assuming a thoroughly polemical stance) is to focus on gospel discontinuity rather than continuity (that which the biblical message could affirm) with respect to the Western cultural project.

42 William Dyrness, *How Does America Hear the Gospel?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

43 McClendon, *Witness*, 66–74.

that evangelicals in the Philippines have been reluctant to address.⁴⁴ Furthermore, McClendon records an important critique of 20th-century anthropological views of traditional religion along with a gospel response to Navajo convictions.

Before we discuss the relevance of McClendon's theological insights to the Philippine setting, it would be wise to look at his outline. The *narrative* structure of his cultural analysis leading to a gospel response is instructive in and of itself. (He follows this outline consistently in his various examples of religion as culture.) It begins with a constructed religious history of the Navajo people as well as an account of their convictional practices. That discussion leads to a history of the Christian encounter with Navajo culture up to modern times. A final section is devoted to a gospel response that takes into account the intersection of the various stories in Navajo life (the Enlightenment story, the older story of the Navajo and the still older biblical story).

The problem of continuity and discontinuity between indigenous religions and Christian faith is actually addressed by McClendon's notion of the 'convergence of stories'. Put simply, this refers to the interaction of stories within a culture. The theologian of culture is interested in how the Great Story interacts or intersects with other stories within the culture. In the process of interaction, it is necessary to ask in what way the stories are received by the culture—i.e. whether a story or stories are taken in, dismissed or merged with the older story of the people. In the case of Navajo culture, one finds that 'when this storied gospel comes to Navajos today it finds not a storyless people but one with two stories already' (i.e. the Enlightenment and the legendary-mythical stories of the Navajos).⁴⁵

In McClendon's analysis of the convergence of stories in Navajo culture, the claims of the gospel story present 'a judging and redeeming word' (in other words, 'a simultaneous yes and no') both to Navajo and Native American religiosity and also to Catholic and Protestant forms of Christian cultural existence that have appeared on Navajo territory.⁴⁶ This simultaneous yes and no of the gospel is McClendon's answer to the theme of continuity and discontinuity between Christian faith and traditional 'religions'. His answer offers a corrective to the very question itself. For McClendon, the question of continuity should not be perceived as a simple grafting of the indigenous 'religion' onto the Christian faith. It is a continuous probing of 'what the gospel has to say both to the old that persists and to the new that has come'.⁴⁷ Hence, one must not talk of continuity in and of itself but always alongside the 'yes' and 'no' of the gospel.

A refreshing critique of anthropological views of Navajo 'religion' informed by postmodern views of cultural anthropology is included in the test case.⁴⁸ McClendon

44 Timoteo Gener, "I Heard a Voice Speaking ... in the Hebrew Tongue" (Acts 26:14): Pauline Insights on Mission and Vernacularizing the Faith', in *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization through Asian Eyes*, ed. Melba Maggay (Manila: OMF Literature, 2013), 57–75. An earlier version of this essay was published as "'A Voice from Heaven Spoke My Native Tongue ...'" (Acts 26:14): Pauline Insights on Mission and Our Cultural Inheritance', *Phronésis* 11, no. 2 (2004): 15–28.

45 McClendon, *Witness*, 72.

46 McClendon, *Witness*, 73–74.

47 McClendon, *Witness*, 73.

48 For a discussion of postmodern theories of culture, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997).

criticizes the modern reconstruction of 'traditional Navajo existence' which presents the primal religious practices of the Navajos as if they are 'timeless' (masking the reconstructive work done by anthropologists).⁴⁹ He also rejects the functionalist view of culture that prevails in the account of modern anthropologists who study Navajo religion and cultural life. The assumption of 'a continuous stability in Navajo religious and cultural life' is rejected.⁵⁰ The standard 20th-century anthropological thinking is that 'cultures must not mingle'.⁵¹ The dominant truth, however, about the Navajo 'seems to be not only that they were and are a people capable of clinging to their inherited convictions and practices, but that they can make remarkable adjustments to new circumstances, new possibilities'.⁵²

Based on my acquaintance with the literature on mission and contextualization, I agree substantially with McClendon's probing work, even though I have criticized his limited application of the biblical understanding of creation. His comments regarding prevailing notions of culture confirm further my sense that 'contextualization' as a missiological/theological approach, with its functionalist framework of understanding culture, is giving way to a better, more promising form of theological engagement with culture, i.e. 'theology as translation' or 'vernacularizing the faith'. Arguably, this needs to be revitalized by new forms of cultural-theological hermeneutics contributed by churches beyond Euro-America, on the way to the new creation that is being established by the life-giving Spirit through the good news of Christ, to the glory of the Father.⁵³

49 McClendon, *Witness*, 69–70.

50 McClendon, *Witness*, 70.

51 McClendon, *Witness*, 72.

52 McClendon, *Witness*, 72.

53 See Timoteo Gener, 'Re-visioning Local Theology: An Integral Dialogue with Practical Theology, a Filipino Evangelical Perspective', *Journal of Asian Mission* 6, no. 2 (2002): 133–66; see also Gener, 'I Heard a Voice Speaking ... in the Hebrew Tongue'.

Book Review

Circles in the Stream: Index, Identification, and Intertext: Reading and Preaching the Story of Judah in Genesis 37–50

Paul E. Koptak

Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022

Pb., 148 pp.

*Reviewed by Bo H. Lim, professor of Old Testament,
Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, WA, USA*

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Paul E. Koptak, professor emeritus of homiletics at North Park Theological Seminary, has written *Circles in the Stream* to help people read and teach the Bible, particularly its narratives and poetry, more effectively. The book transgresses the genre categories of typical academic publications. The work combines intellectual memoir, introduction to the literary analysis of Kenneth Burke, introduction to hermeneutics, introduction to homiletics, exegetical study of Genesis 37–50, and homilies on Genesis 37–50. While these topics may seem disconnected at first glance, they all serve Koptak's overriding concern that Christian ministers may gain more insight into the biblical text and better connect the teachings of Scripture to the lives of congregants. The interdisciplinary nature of this book is not surprising since it reflects Koptak's own ministerial vocation as a professor of both Old Testament and communication while at North Park Seminary.

The title serves as a metaphor that summarizes the book's thesis. Koptak likens the ripples that extend outwards from a stone cast into a river to the ongoing impact of Scripture upon its readers. While he acknowledges the need to acquire exegetical skills, Koptak's main concern is to train ministers to be excellent interpreters of Scripture and of the lives of the people they serve. Koptak believes the text invariably connects to life as he writes, 'Still, deep study of the text is akin to careful study of human relations, asking what brings joy or sorrow, confusion or conviction, despair or determination' (2). He goes on to state that 'this book is more than a theory of interpreting texts; it is a practical literary-rhetorical-theological pathway that leads to those connections' (3).

These 'literary-rhetorical-theological' connections are determined through following three steps: (1) find the connections within a given passage by making an index; (2) find the connection with the life issue by attending to identification; (3) find the connections between this text and the rest of the biblical canon by tracing intertexts. Koptak attributes this method to the insights of literary critic Kenneth Burke, who sought to identify the symbolic logics within literature and how they were adopted by readers. According to Koptak, Burke's process of identification connects biblical interpretation to biblical proclamation. This move includes Koptak's addition of the step of 'intertext', where based on his commitment to a

canonical and theological interpretation, he identifies relationships between texts within the biblical canon.

Following the introduction, the book consists of three chapters. Each chapter explains one step in his method, accompanied by a commentary on a passage within Genesis 37–50, and a sermon on that passage. Chapter 1 explores the step of Index through a study and exposition of the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, chapter 2 addresses Identification and the story of Judah and Joseph in Genesis 43–45, and chapter 3 explores Intertext through the story of Judah's blessing in Genesis 48–49.

Circles in the Stream reflects the thinking of a mature scholar and an experienced teacher. It is ambitious to address such a wide range of topics in a relatively short work, but Koptak successfully accomplishes this task and offers compelling instruction on how ministers can be better readers and preachers of Scripture. Often, students of Scripture struggle to make the connections between hermeneutical theory, exegesis and preaching, and books are typically written to address only one of these topics. In this work, Koptak pulls the curtain back to reveal a process that may appear a mystery to many.

Those who are familiar with canonical and theological interpretation may find that Koptak's method runs parallel to theirs. Burke's influence on Koptak's thinking is similar to the influence of Erich Auerbach, another literary critic, upon the theologian Hans Frei. To Koptak's methodology with its focus on the 'literary-rhetorical-theological', I would add the 'contextual'. Given the importance of personal and communal identity within Koptak's method, additional teaching on contextual hermeneutical and homiletical methods will be needed to supplement his work.

Seminarians, pastors and teachers will greatly benefit from this book. *Circles in the Stream* will certainly influence the manner in which I teach Old Testament courses to seminarians going forward.