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Table of Contents

A Note from the (New) Editor

Warm greetings from the *Evangelical Review of Theology*. This issue marks my first as executive editor of the journal. Dr. Bruce Barron ably edited *ERT* for seven years as it grew immensely in readership and became an open-access journal. Thankfully, Bruce continues to serve as copyeditor for *ERT*, and I am grateful for his keen eye, vast network of relationships both inside and outside the World Evangelical Alliance, and passion for the global church. This issue also marks *ERT*'s transition to two annual issues rather than four.

Despite these transitions, I am committed to ensuring that *ERT* remains a faithful, relevant, and trusted voice for evangelical Christians. Issue 49.1 draws on winsome voices from around the globe who offer us a combination of biblical reflection, practical theology, and cultural analysis.

Evert Van de Poll, a Dutch missiologist who serves in France, offers some timely thoughts on the recently concluded Lausanne 4 conference held in South Korea. Karen Shaw, a seasoned teacher, takes us back to the art of theological education as a conversation that imitates our divine Pedagogue. Robert Coleman argues for a re-contextualization of spirituality for African contexts that probes the Bible's paradoxical understanding of power as 'Christ crucified'. Jeffrey Anderson treats the Bible's teaching on glorification, a theological theme that has been unjustly neglected in modern discussions of eschatology. Edward Smither demonstrates how the ecumenical creeds supply examples of contextual theology that continue to speak centuries after their writing. Andrii Meleshko combines a biblical theology of hope with a study of how this hope is believed and embraced by Ukrainian war refugees. Steven Paas shows that the nature of God as love must be central in ongoing debates over who counts as true 'Israel'.

I hope you enjoy this issue's journey with Christian scholars who showcase the riches of the global church!

— Jerry Hwang, Executive Editor

ERT (2025) 49:1, 5–18

Evaluating the Lausanne Congress's Seoul Statement

Evert Van de Poll

Each world congress of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelisation (LCWE) has produced a statement presenting a theology of mission as well as the major challenges of world evangelisation. The first was the now famous Lausanne Covenant (1974), which was followed by the Manila Manifesto (1989) and the Cape Town Commitment (2010). Following this custom, the fourth world congress in Seoul-Incheon in September 2024 released the Seoul Statement, as well as the complementary *State of the Great Commission Report* (SGCR).[1]

How do I, as an outsider and sympathetic observer of the Lausanne Movement, evaluate the Seoul congress documents? I notice a number of important aspects. In the area of mission theology: the emphasis on the Great Commission as the basis and content of mission, the double priority of evangelisation and discipleship, and the introduction of a new mission model or paradigm of 'presence, proclamation and practice'. With respect to the practice of evangelisation: the emphasis on the vital role of the local church, and the clear position on a number of ethical issues, notably sexuality, gender, marriage and family.

In this article, I will summarise these aspects, make comments and formulate some questions and critical remarks. But before I deal with the content of the two documents, a word about their making is appropriate. In the article 'Introducing the Seoul Statement', published on the LCWE website, we read that these documents are complementary and should be read and studied together, as 'an informative and inspirational tool for the global church'. Both documents were written in advance by a Theology Working Group, confirmed by the leadership of Lausanne, and made public at the beginning of the congress in Seoul-Incheon.

The purpose of the Seoul Statement is not to replace previous congress declarations, but to affirm them and build further on them, by focusing on 'biblical and theological gaps'. Thus, the authors have selected seven areas to which the previous Lausanne documents, in their view, had not given sufficient attention: the Gospel, the Bible, the Church, Man Created in the Image of God, Discipleship, Family of Nations, and New Technologies.

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1 Seoul Statement: https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement; State of the Great Commission Report: https://lausanne.org/report.

The SGCR opens with an article on the theological foundation of the Great Commission, which is followed by 23 short chapters with statistical information about major trends that are shaping the world and the church, and about areas needing greater strategic collaborative action in the area of evangelisation. It also contains regional reports from the 12 regions into which the LCWE has divided the world.

Mission is Great Commission

What is the importance of the Seoul documents in the area of mission theology? Seoul marks the 50th anniversary of the missiological debate about what 'mission' entails. It was sparked by the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, which proposed a comprehensive definition of the mission of the church, mainly in terms of evangelisation—the *proclamation* of the gospel. But in its famous paragraph 5, this understanding was broadened to include the *demonstration* of the gospel, through providing humanitarian aid striving for social justice. Since then, evangelical theologians and mission practitioners have been discussing how we should see the relationship between these two, and which of the two has priority. Is evangelisation the most important and most urgent aspect of the church's mission or is demonstration of the gospel in concrete action equally important and urgent? The Manila Manifesto (1989) more or less confirmed the first view, which I would call 'evangelisation first', but the Cape Town Commitment (2010) clearly opted for the second approach and formulated an 'integral mission' in which proclamation and demonstration have equal importance and should go together. This idea of integral mission is grounded in the idea of the mission of God, *missio dei*, i.e. his salvation plan to restore mankind and the whole creation from the consequences of evil and of human sin.

When we look at the Seoul Statement against this background, it is striking that it only mentions integral mission and *missio dei* once or twice in passing, only in quotations taken from the Cape Town Commitment, but that it does not use these ideas in its theological argument.

Neither do the Seoul documents use the word-pair 'proclamation and demonstration', probably because of its loaded and problematic connotations. In some articles, there is a plea to 'declare and display' the gospel, which I suppose is meant as an alternative terminology. The overall theme of the congress was 'let the church declare and display Christ together'. From participants I have heard that this theme was very prominent throughout the congress, but that is not so apparent to someone like me who only reads the text. Granted, this theme is the last phrase of both the preamble and the conclusion of the Seoul Statement. But for the rest, this duality is only mentioned a few times, and it is not linked to the former duality of proclamation and demonstration.

Instead, there is a clear emphasis on the Great Commission—the evangelistic mandate at the end of the synoptic Gospels, and notably the version in Matthew 28. The latter plays a key role in the documents and runs as a thread through all the articles and chapters. So, according to the Seoul Statement, the mission of the church should be understood first of all as evangelisation. In the preamble this tone is set, by emphasising 'the church's commitment to the great apostolic priority of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ in order to bring salvation to people lost in sin'.

What is at stake?

One might assume that evangelical readers know very well what this good news and this salvation are all about. Moreover, the previous Lausanne documents had already presented the evangelical understanding of the Good News. Even so, the authors deemed it necessary to devote the first of the seven sections to this well-known theme and to reiterate the classic evangelical Protestant theology of salvation through Jesus Christ. This arouses the question: what motivated the authors to cover common ground in this first section? What is at stake? Is there a danger perhaps that evangelicals might foster different understandings of the gospel? Are we confronted with theologies of mission that need to be corrected? Sadly, the authors do not answer these questions, so we are left wondering why.

The same questions come up when reading the second section, wholly devoted to the Bible and its proper interpretation. The authors summarise the 'high view', dear to evangelicals, of the Bible as 'God's self-revelation' and therefore 'the authoritative, unerring, set-apart text that gathers and governs the people [of God]' (II, 17). But then, the authors hasten to add:

> What the church needs most today is an affirmation not of the nature of the Bible but of its interpretation. … [This] requires a way of reading the Bible that is attentive to its historical, literary, and canonical contexts, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, and guided by the interpretive tradition of the church. (II, Introduction)

So the real issue of this section is what the Seoul Statement calls 'faithful' or 'gospel-centred' interpretation. What does that mean?

> The central message of Scripture is the Gospel of the kingdom of God, the proclamation of Jesus' incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and return. … Therefore, we read the whole of Scripture in accordance with and guided by this gospel. … We should honour the gospel-centred interpretative tradition … that stretches back to the apostolic church. (II, 18, 22)

Why do the authors insist on this interpretative tradition? Is the evangelical mission world perhaps endangered by other ways of interpreting the Bible? Sadly, the authors do not give us any indication, so the reader is left wondering.

There is more in the Bible than the gospel

Moreover, I would argue that the reading of the Bible advocated in the Seoul Statement leads to a reduction of the rich and multivariate content of the Scriptures. First of all, 'gospel-centred' is not the most appropriate term for the interpretative tradition to which the authors appeal. A better term is 'Christocentric', i.e. seeing the Person and work of Christ in all the Scriptures. This leads to my second point: there is more in the Bible than the gospel of God's reign and of personal salvation through Jesus Christ, however important this is. For example, the doctrine of creation, the natural law and the revealed law, the moral teaching of the New Testament, the message of the prophets, the salvation of Israel, the nations and all creation. The interpretative tradition to which the Seoul Statement appeals has always seen the larger picture.

Double priority of evangelism and discipleship

The second important aspect of the Seoul Statement is that it defines the mission of the church not in terms of proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, as was hitherto usual in the Lausanne Movement, but in terms of evangelism and discipleship. It also uses a second word-pair that amounts to the same: declare and display (the gospel). The authors emphasises that the Great Commission in Matthew 28 is not a mandate to just *evangelise* all nations, but to make *disciples*.

> This involves *two equally important priorities*: the evangelistic task of baptising them into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the pastoral task of teaching them to obey all that [Christ] had commanded. (Preamble, emphasis added)

I suppose that in this insistence on a *double* priority of the church, the authors wish to avoid a new priority debate that might dominate the reflection on mission and evangelism for maybe another 50 years to come.

The Seoul Statement goes at length to develop these two tasks, showing all along that they are intrinsically linked to one another. One of the sections (V) is especially devoted to discipleship, which is defined as 'a call to holiness and mission'. In other words:

> Those charged with the task of announcing God's good news to all peoples must themselves live as disciples and understand that the proper aim of our mission is the transformation of those who hear and believe the good news to live as disciples who obey all that the Lord taught. (V, 72)

This recalls what several mission theologians have put forward in recent years, namely that we need a more balanced missiology which we could summarise as *reaching* (through evangelism) *and teaching* (the new believers in their churches).[2]

The focus on discipleship is already present in all the major mission declarations of the last 15 years, beginning with the Cape Town Commitment in 2010. 'Missionary discipleship' is the overarching theme in Pope Francis' encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* of 2013. In 2016, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches published the Arusha Call for Transforming Discipleship, and the General Assembly of the World Evangelical Alliance in Bogor, Indonesia in 2019 also emphasised this theme.

Following this trend, the Seoul Statement is even more explicit in putting discipleship formation high on the missionary agenda of churches and agencies, but also at the heart of the mission mandate itself. In order to corroborate this, the SGCR opens with an excellent article on 'the theology of the Great Commission'. This theology is based not only on the classic foundational texts in Matthew 28 ('go into all the world') and its parallels in Mark and Luke/Acts, but also on John 20 ('as the Father sent Me, so I send you'), called 'the Johannine Great Commission'. John Stott already made this combination during the first congress in Lausanne in 1974. Since then, many missiologists have adopted the same approach, including the authors of the SGCR. It emphasises that this passage is not so much about what actions we

2 Cf. the title of the book by M. David Sills on the mission mandate of the church: *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010).

should engage in as about who we are and how we live. In other words, it is about our discipleship rather than about proclaiming the gospel.

I appreciate the way in which the Seoul documents broaden the understanding of the mission mandate. This is an important step. By concentrating on discipleship, the priority debate of evangelisation and social responsibility is overcome through a new synthesis. In the words of the Seoul Statement:

> We cannot make disciples without announcing the good news and cannot be disciples without a deep engagement with a broken world. … The pursuit of righteousness in our personal lives, our homes, our churches, and in the societies in which we live can no more be separated from the announcement of the Gospel than being a disciple can be separated from making disciples. (V, 73)

Not 'making' but 'teaching'

In this respect I want to make two remarks. As the opening article in the SGCR rightly states, the central 'action' in the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is *mathēteusatē*. This is an imperative form of a verb that comes from *mathētes*, 'disciple'. It is difficult to translate in our modern language, and often circumscribed as 'make disciples', also in the SGCR and other Lausanne documents. 'Disciple making' is a standard expression in evangelical mission literature. However, the verb 'to make' is absent from the text. A better translation is 'teach' or 'instruct' (someone) 'as disciple'. Sometimes it is rendered by the verb 'to disciple' (someone), but that is not a current word outside Christian circles. At any rate, in Matthew 28, we are not called to 'make' or produce disciples, but to 'teach' all the peoples in all the world 'as disciples'. Older Bible translations have therefore rendered the phrase as 'teach' all the nations.

A teaching mandate

According to the Seoul Statement, the Great Commission in Matthew 28 is an evangelisation-plus-discipleship mandate, but I would go one step further than that and argue that it is a teaching mandate. The words 'evangelisation' and 'proclamation' and 'gospel' are absent. On the contrary, the mandate adds a fourth and final 'action', namely 'teaching' the commandments of Jesus.

In fact, when we call communicating the good news 'evangelisation', we should realise that this is not something that precedes teaching. Rather, evangelisation is already a form of teaching, namely teaching other people about Jesus and about the content of the gospel, its pertinence, its invitation. Listening to the gospel, i.e. to the explanation of who Jesus is and what He has done to bring salvation, is already a beginning moment of discipleship. When, hopefully, someone's heart opens up, a process begins that can lead to becoming a follower of Jesus Christ and a permanent learner in his life-school of discipleship.

A kind of new mission model: presence, proclamation and practice

In the passages describing the gospel and the double priority of evangelisation and discipleship, something like a new mission model emerges. The Seoul Statement

ignores well-known models like holistic mission, integral mission, *missio dei*, or the Five Marks of Mission, a model developed in the Anglican Church and widely adopted in Europe. It also bypasses the debate about the relationship between proclamation and social responsibility. Instead, it introduces a new terminology: 'declare and display', and 'presence, proclamation and practice'. With a reference to Matthew 28, the Seoul Statement affirms:

> The church is called to declare and display Christ together. The Great Commission summons all believers everywhere to participate in our Lord's will to make disciples of all peoples, by baptising those who believe in the Gospel message and teaching them true obedience to Jesus Christ. In the power of his Word and Spirit, God sends us out into the world as a holy people to bear witness to the Gospel before a watching world. We do this through our Christ-filled presence, our Christ-centred proclamation, and our Christlike practice. (II, 43)

This squares with the theme of the congress, 'let the church declare and display Christ together'. Participants at the congress tell me that this duality of declare-display played an important role in the programme, and that three large tarpaulins were put up with parallel exhibitions under the themes 'declare', 'display' and 'together'. Jim Memory, co-director of the European region of the Lausanne Movement, explains that the organisers wanted to show 'that the mandates to proclaim the Gospel and to demonstrate the love of God in action should be held together as equally important, in a creative tension'.

So much for the congress. When we turn to the documents of Seoul 2024, this terminology of declare and display does not play an important role. Instead, the authors emphasise the triad presence, proclamation and practice—in that order. This 3P model shows how evangelisation and discipleship work together to communicate the gospel.

Presence refers to being the 'salt of the earth' that must maintain its integrity and so never lose its potency. It refers to the presence and the lifestyle of individual Christians *and* of church communities in the various spheres of society—families, neighbourhoods, schools, the workplace, the public square, politics. 'God uses our practical discipleship in these areas to make known his nearness to a world long alienated from him' (III, 44).

Proclamation is 'essential' to the witness of the church. 'The church displays God's saving power of the Gospel and sends heralds to declare his gospel where Christ is not known' (III, 45).

Practice includes what previous Lausanne documents called 'social responsibility' or 'the demonstration of the Gospel'. But it is more encompassing than that. The relevant paragraph is worth quoting in full:

> Just as the world hears Christ in gospel proclamation, it can also see Christ through our love for one another and our neighbours, through how we care for his creation and do excellent work in our daily callings. Just as faith comes by hearing, faith is always accompanied by works. These works promote the common good, prioritise care for the poor and most vulnerable, and advance the cause of justice following the example of our Lord. (III, 46)

Discipleship and local church connection

The Seoul Statement goes at length to describe a third foundational element of carrying out the Great Commission besides evangelisation and discipleship, namely active involvement in a local church. I am not sure under which P this should be put, but the Statement devotes a whole section to the church (section III). Living as a disciple of Jesus and 'making disciples' (the term used in the text) are both inseparable from a local church community and its regular worship services. Therefore, 'We call on all churches to give greater attention to worship as a foundational practice and to make worship a more corporate experience through their preaching, prayers, and songs' (III, 39).

The topic is taken up again in Section V on discipleship. Here we read that local churches 'play a vital role in our formation as disciples' (V, 75). Moreover:

> They play a vital role in providing accountability and modelling healthy patterns of leadership and governance for ministry leaders, missionaries, and ministry partners. … Therefore, we call on ministry leaders and missionaries to remain in vital fellowship with and accountability to local churches. (V, 76)

The emphasis on ecclesiology is noteworthy. The Seoul Statement places its reflections in the framework of the classical marks of the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. It also includes paragraphs on the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Without taking any denominational stand, it marks them as central elements of the life of any church, because they are ordered by Jesus Himself. Also striking is the call for orderly worship services and regular participation. All of this is completely absent in previous Lausanne declarations.

I think that the emphasis on the life of local churches, as an integral element of the mission mandate of evangelisation and discipleship, is extremely important—at least in the European context with which I am familiar, where there is a tendency to disconnect 'believing' and 'belonging'. Many people experience or seek 'spirituality' outside organised and institutional church life. Moreover, missionary and other para-church organisations are easily becoming a parallel circuit for their workers, operating beside local churches and without accountability to the latter.

Clear stance on sexuality, gender, marriage and family

A striking aspect of the Seoul Statement is that it pays so much attention to the practice of our faith, the moral norms and values to which we adhere as disciples of Jesus Christ. Three ethical issues are singled out, issues that have not been dealt with in previous Lausanne congress documents. Together they cover more than half the document.

What strikes the reader in particular is that the bulk of this half is devoted to ethical issues in the area of sexuality, gender, marriage and family. Apparently, the authors felt the need to address these issues in depth and take a clear stance, because this section is by far the largest one, counting for 30 percent of the whole statement. And it is even put before the section on discipleship! What is the link with the communication of the gospel?

> Today, the world is absorbed with the question, 'What does it mean to be human?' This makes the Christian doctrine of the human person critically

> important. How we answer this question has profound implications for our witness in the world and our life in the church. It goes to the very heart of the great upheavals in the world with regard to issues such as identity, human sexuality, and the implications of advancing technologies. (IV, introduction)

And so, the section opens by recalling biblical anthropology. (1) Human beings are uniquely created in the image of God. (2) Human sin affects the degree to which human beings can fully reflect the image of God and corrupts our human nature and capacities as well as our relationships with others. (3) The image of God in us is restored in Jesus Christ. 'As the preeminent and perfect image of God, he is the human ideal to which every believer is being transformed by the Holy Spirit' (IV, 51). This scheme of creation, fall and restoration is the context in which the Seoul Statement places the norms and values by which we live as disciples, and the foundational reference for discussing ethical issues.

The statement continues with an extensive discussion of sexual identity and gender, marriage and singleness, same-sex relations and same-sex marriage. Western societies are increasingly abandoning the traditional norms and values that are rooted in Christian morals and biblical anthropology, as they have been taught for ages by the church. The new morality is cultural liberalism with its so-called progressive values of gender diversity, individual desire as the highest ethical norm and, in these areas, inclusiveness and tolerance.

This morality is secularised and post-Christian. It is also gaining ground in churches, and even making inroads in the Protestant evangelical world, at least in Western societies. As for evangelicals in Europe, we can observe a difference between the northwestern part, where a minority of churches accept homosexuality and transgenderism, and the rest of the continent, where churches almost unanimously reject these practices as going against the teaching of the Bible and therefore incompatible with discipleship. That is also the position of evangelical churches and theologians in the Global South and East.

It is no doubt due to the weight of the non-Western voices in global evangelicalism that the Seoul Statement takes a clear and unambiguous position. It affirms what all the streams of Christianity agreed upon until a generation ago, and what we now call a 'traditional' or 'conservative' view—conservative in the sense of conserving, maintaining what we adhered to in the past. In this respect I cannot do better than quote the two key paragraphs. Referring to the biblical doctrine of creation, they affirm:

> Humans are created as sexual beings with clearly identifiable physical characteristics as male and female and relational characteristics as man and woman. The 'sex' of an individual refers to the biological characteristics that distinguish male from female, whereas 'gender' refers to the psychological, social, and cultural associations with being male or female. …
>
> We lament any distortion of sexuality. We reject the notion that individuals may determine their gender without regard to our createdness. Although biological sex and gender may be distinguished, they are inseparable. Maleness and femaleness are an inherent fact of human createdness—a fact to which cultures give expression in distinguishing between men and women. We also reject the

> notion of gender fluidity (the claim to fluctuating gender identity or gender expression, depending on situation and experience). (IV, 56–57)

Taking these principles as a lead, the statement affirms that marriage is 'the exclusive bond of one man and one woman', and as such 'the only legitimate context for sexual intercourse'. It 'laments' that some churches 'define same-sex partnerships as biblically valid marriages' and 'grieves' that they 'have acquiesced to the demands of culture and consecrate such relationships as marriages' (IV, 59–61).

It further deplores that the pursuit of sexual freedom has 'downplayed the procreational aspect of marital sex, which has often led to the devaluing of children and the dramatic increase in abortions' (IV, 63).

The authors pay special attention to singleness, saying single persons 'are fully able to fulfil the Creator's will and bear witness to Jesus Christ'. They call local churches to support both singles and married couples through teaching, mentoring, and networks of mutual encouragement and practical support. Together, they witness to the power of the gospel by modelling the biblical values of deep friendships, love and faithfulness in marriage, the honouring of parents, and the dedicated nurture of children (IV, 65–66).

After a short exegesis of the four passages explicitly condemning homosexual practice, the Seoul Statement draws the 'inescapable conclusion that God considers such acts as a violation of his intention for sex … , and therefore sinful' (IV, 68).

The authors reaffirm the classical evangelical adage, 'God loves the sinner but rejects sin'. Following that guideline, they call for pastoral care of believers who experience same-sex attraction. Churches should accept them as brothers and sisters while showing them the way of sexual abstinence and singleness. No word about 'healing' or 'changing into heterosexuals' and 'getting married' (with someone of the opposite sex). Instead, there is a call to 'repent from lack of love in the Christian communities towards believers who face challenges because of their sexual attraction' (IV, 69).

In this respect, I would like to quote the Norwegian mission theologian Rolf Kjøde, who was present at the congress in Seoul. He has this to say:

> Communication about same-sex attraction from a classical Christian perspective at times lacks the necessary personal identification that gives a touch of relational understanding and empathy. Vaughan Roberts addressed these issues from a biblical and personal perspective in a plenary speech at the congress. This was an important address as it was the first open encounter for many of the participants with an evangelical leader with same-sex attractions.[3]

Finally, the authors warn against the tendency to single out homosexual practice among other forms of trespassing biblical norms, when they write that 'the biblical insistence to resist temptation and maintain sexual holiness, in both desire and behaviour, applies equally to heterosexually attracted individuals' (IV, 69–70).

3 Rolf Kjøde, 'Seoul Statement, a Review', *Vista,* issue 46, December 2024. https://vistajournal.online.

Conduct and witness

One could be surprised that a declaration on evangelisation deals with such questions of conduct, because this is not at all customary. But it is quite logical given the whole thrust of the Seoul Statement that evangelisation and discipleship belong together and that our entire walk as believers is part of the calling to mission and holiness. The sexual conduct of believers is clearly relevant to their integrity as witnesses of Jesus Christ in words and deeds.

A voice to be listened to, especially in the Western world

While most historical mainline churches and also some evangelicals in Europe will certainly have a problem with the Seoul Statement on these questions, I belong to those evangelicals who find themselves in agreement with the pastoral approach and with the way in which the statement upholds biblical norms.

I am persuaded that this voice needs to be heard in Europe, and especially in countries where evangelical pastors have become reluctant to give clear guidance to believers in their teaching and preaching, because of a 'pastoral' concern for Christians who have adopted a liberal position in these issues, and/or out of fear for the legal consequences—one might be accused of discrimination and condemned by a court of justice.

Other issues: nationalism and technology

The Seoul Statement deals with two other ethical issues, albeit to a far lesser extent. First, it addresses conflicts between peoples and nationalism. While the section on sexuality, gender and marriage was clear, this one, entitled 'The Family of Nations', is a bit confusing. The thrust seems to be that Christians should be known as people of peace, and that they should contribute to the reconciliation among peoples in conflict—'whether as frontline peacemakers between conflicting parties or through negotiation, influence, and intercession in the background of the conflict' (VI, 78).

But then the focus shifts to the opposite, to the phenomenon that Christians often 'fail to condemn and restrain violence by remaining silent, by promoting nationalism, or by unjustly supporting conflicts through deficient theological justification'. The list of examples includes the history and legacy of racism and black slavery; the holocaust against Jews; apartheid; 'ethnic cleansing'; inter-Christian sectarian violence; decimation of indigenous populations; political and ethnic violence; Palestinian suffering; caste oppression and tribal genocide (VI, 80–82).

Nationalism: lack of clarity

Particular attention is given to nationalism, which is defined as 'the belief that every state should have a single, national culture and no other', and ethnonationalism, 'the belief that every ethnic group should have its own state' (VI, 85). The authors seem to condemn nationalism categorically, but their definitions are incomplete and defective. There are several forms of nationalism, ranging from a patriotic love for one's country to a militant and aggressive ideology that sets up one nation against others. How should evangelicals relate to the nation or nation-state of which they are part? The Seoul Statement does not clarify this. It also leaves aside the question

of how the universality of the church and the gospel relates to our nationhood and the national identity of the disciples of Jesus Christ. Granted, there is in the evangelical world at large a dearth of biblical teaching on this subject, and this statement is no exception to that. In this respect I would like to refer the readers to my article and the articles of others in the recent issue of *Vista*, which dealt with this very issue in the context of Europe.[4]

At the end, the section returns to the initial theme of peacemaking, calling believers to serve the peoples that are in conflict, to labour for peace among the nations, to pray for the persecuted church, and to pray for those who govern us in order that they allow the gospel to be proclaimed to all the peoples.

Technology: a positive critical stance

The second issue is technology. Several modern innovations lend themselves to the merging of humans with technology, or the creation of immersive environments in which humans may become subjected to technology's domination. These potentialities arise from areas such as genetic engineering, cloning, biotechnology, mind-uploading, digital media, virtual reality and artificial intelligence. These technologies raise moral and ethical concerns in terms of their impact on society and on the planet.

This section begins with a recap of the doctrines of creation and of man created in the image of God, and it then focuses on the mandate of stewardship of creation, including the stewardship of these technological advancements:

> Biblical wisdom is vital to enable the church to be discerning and definitive about the moral and ethical implications of emerging technologies, even as it embraces and stewards the fruit of God-given human creativity and innovation, including in ways that accelerate evangelism and discipleship (VII, introduction).

As for me, I would like to endorse this positive-critical position. Interestingly, the Seoul Statement also deals with the way in which new technologies affect the worship services of the churches, and the communication of the Gospel. In the first case, the authors call for caution, but in the second case they 'applaud the church's evangelistic drive that has led to increasing technological adaptation and unprecedented opportunities for sharing the Gospel' (VI, 96–97).

Omissions and matters of debate

What the documents did not mention

So far, I have looked at and commented what the Seoul documents say. But I also notice that some important topics are *not* dealt with. Given their absence from the text, I can only mention them briefly.

With respect to the theology of mission, there is no mention of the idea of *missional* churches and missional discipleship, for which there is so much attention among Christians in the secularising societies in Europe, North America and elsewhere. The 'missional' approach is gaining ground, as an alternative to the traditio-

4 See *Vista* issue 45, 'Nationalism in Europe Revisited', https://vistajournal.online/news-and-events/vista-45-nationalism-in-europe.

nal 'missionary' approach. I would have liked to see this reflected in the Seoul Statement, all the more so since discipleship is a key concern of the 'missional' movement.

Neither do we read about the specific challenge of evangelisation in a post-Christianised society, where the message of the Bible is generally seen as 'old news' instead of 'good' news, where the Christian faith is relegated to a past and surpassed stage of history, and where the church suffers from a bad image as it is associated with cultural domination, colonialism, antisemitism, capitalism and what have you.

As a third point, there is no word about being witnesses of the truth in a 'post-truth society' full of fake news and conspiracy theories, and in a postmodern culture marked by cultural relativism and a deep mistrust towards any claim to absolute truth.

Coming to the area of ethical issues, I am surprised, to say the least, by the total lack of any reference to the huge ecological problems of pollution, climate change, climate refugees, and so on. They constitute one of the most pressing issues in today's world. How is it that the Seoul Statement remains silent on these issues? And why do the authors, for all their emphasis on discipleship, not mention the biblical mandate of stewardship of creation? Surely, this can be qualified as a 'great omission'.

Matters of debate

The Seoul Statement has aroused reactions of approval as well as critical reactions among the more than 3,000 delegates, representing the various streams in the evangelical world.[5]

One matter of debate is the issue of sharpening the focus on evangelisation or keeping the wider perspective of integral mission that includes social action. This debate is as old as the Lausanne Movement itself and it is far from settled yet. During the congress, a group of 235 delegates signed an open letter asking for a revised version of the Seoul Statement that would include issues of integral mission, such as the vast climate and nature crisis that we all encounter. In general, they ask for a bolder prophetic voice.[6] At the same time, others expressed their concern that the statement did not sufficiently emphasise the priority of evangelism and its indispensability to our mission. Already before the end of the congress, one of the delegates, well-known American missiologist Ed Stetzer, published an article in which he argued that 'we need a greater focus on evangelism's place in the holistic mission'.[7]

Are these two perspectives incompatible? Some might think that evangelical mission leaders simply have to agree to disagree on this point. But I do not think we should settle for a draw between the two opposing camps, so to speak, and leave the matter aside. A better way of dealing with this question is to recognise that there is

5 For in interesting article summarising the ongoing discussion, see Morgan Lee, 'Lausanne Theologians Explain Seoul Statement That Surprised Congress Delegates', *Christianity Today,* 26 September 2024, https://christianitytoday.com/?p=308177.

6 I owe this information to Rolf Kjøde, 'Seoul Statement, a Review', in *Vista,* Issue 46, December 2024. https://vistajournal.online.

7 Ed Stetzer, 'Responding to the Lausanne Seoul Statement: We Need a Greater Focus on Evangelism's Place in the Holistic Mission', *Churchleaders*, 25 September 2024. https://churchleaders.com/voices/497595-ed-stetzer-my-appeal-to-lausanne-dts.html.

a tension, and to always keep the two perspectives in mind at the same time. That was indeed the reason why the congress chose the theme 'let the church declare and display the Gospel together'. I find myself in agreement with the comments of two European delegates whom I quoted already above. Rolf Kjøde writes:

> These strong emphases need to be repeated at every major crossroads such as the Lausanne congresses. With a frequency of coming together and give global statements on mission every 15 years, the movement cannot afford to leave any of the sides out on any occasion.[8]

Jim Memory corroborates:

> The word 'together' in the theme of the Congress mainly refers to the unity imperative among churches and organisations, but also to the imperative to 'declare' and 'display' together. We cannot collapse this into one as primary and the other secondary. There will always be voices at the two extremes arguing with great passion that right now that the priority is one or the other, and in a given context and moment they may be 100% correct, but not in the universal sense. These two are to be held together, held in tension, but not averaged out to some 'mean position' that loses its prophetic edge where we need the challenge of the poles.[9]

He observes that many churches in Europe think that they are doing their bit for world mission by giving to humanitarian projects, and he adds that such churches need to be challenged to proclaim the gospel. But he recognises that in other places it will be the opposite.

A second matter of discussion is the organisation of the Lausanne 4 congress in Seoul, L4 for short. Much of the process and the outcomes of the meetings were to a large extent planned in advance. One of the delegates who had a problem with this kind of procedure is Jan Wessels, co-director of the European Evangelical Alliance. When asked for a reaction, he quoted a passage from the blog of another delegate, Jay Matenga, saying that 'this perfectly summarises my struggle to make anything of the congress.' Here is the passage:

> Such an event brings together three types of people. Let's call them: path makers, path bakers, and path takers. … In my experience of Lausanne over the years it has promoted itself on being a community of expert leaders and its congresses as the gathering place for such experts. It led me to expect that this congress would be a place where path makers met and together mapped new ways into the future for global Evangelicalism and its missions, to co-create a vision for path bakers to grow, support, and promote, and path takers to follow and work out. …
>
> However, it became abundantly clear that the intention of the congress was to reach the path bakers and teach the path takers. Lausanne Central was not interested in hearing from path makers at L4. They would probably argue that they 'listened' prior to the event, but those listening forums were little more than information extraction exercises. … No opportunity was planned to allow us to

8 Kjøde, 'Seoul Statement, a Review'.

9 Jim Memory, email correspondence with author, 17 November 2024.

influence thinking at the event itself (unless a collaborative or interest group protested, as some did).[10]

In a similar vein, some delegates have criticised the fact that the Seoul Statement was written before the congress, and that there was no possibility to give further input and have the text of the statement amended on certain points. But apparently this is not definitely ruled out, since the organisers have left open the possibility of publishing a revised version at some time after the congress.

Conclusion and recommendation

So much for the omissions and matters of debate. Despite the critical remarks that can be made, my overall evaluation of the Seoul documents is positive. I commend them to a wide readership, in academia, in mission circles and in churches. The Seoul Statement presents in a concise way a promising model of mission that has the potential to bring together theologians and practitioners with different foci: evangelisation first, integral mission, church planting, discipleship formation, etc. The same can be said of the theology of the Great Commission in the excellent opening article in the SGCR. Practitioners and educators alike will certainly profit from the wealth of statistical information and the elucidating regional reports.

10 Jan Wessels, email correspondence of 17 November 2024. For the blog of Jay Matenga, see https://jaymatenga.com/l4-reflections/.

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Theological Education in Dialogue

Karen Shaw

A wise professor once told me that God is the Divine Pedagogue. I like that idea. I am a teacher by gifting and training, and much of what I have done as a missionary and pastor is related to communicating truth: theological education, teaching in churches, evangelism and discipling. Just as rulers should learn from the great King how to rule with justice, wisdom and mercy, and just as parents should learn from our Father in heaven how to love and discipline their children, so teachers should learn from the Divine Pedagogue about how to instil in others wisdom and a knowledge of the truth. Or to put it the other way around, the best teachers model for their students something of the divine pedagogy.

Theological education at its best is Christocentric

An inevitable result of theological education (in the very broadest sense of the term)[1] is identity formation. This takes place whether or not the instructor is aware of the process or intentional about it. Students learn to apply labels to themselves and others: liberal, exclusivist, premillennialist, neo-Reformed and the like. Unless the teaching of theology is Christocentric, these labels become more divisive than descriptive. The only way to remain ecumenical and evangelical at the same time is to relate primarily to Christ, and only secondarily to other Christians through him. If students learn to relate to one another primarily on the basis of theological labels, the possibilities for genuine understanding, mutual correction, reconciliation and growth through fellowship decrease. Christ's presence at the centre of theological education infuses a wholesome spirit of humility into the procedure.

Without Christ at the centre, evangelism and apologetics (which I consider as lying within my broad definition of theological education) become triumphalist. There is a world of difference between trying to score points in a religious debate and introducing someone to the Truth in person; between winning trophies for one's religious team and sharing with a soul who is lost how one can find the way to salvation. I have come to realize that, in general, conversations that focus simply on comparing Islam and Christianity are a waste of time, but I have never regretted talking with a Muslim about Jesus.

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1 I treat theological education in a very broad sense, encompassing evangelism, individual and group discipleship, teaching in church contexts, inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue, and orientation and in-service training for missionaries, as well as formal theological instruction. For the purposes of this paper, theological education is any activity the goal of which is to communicate Christian truth.

One cannot have a Christocentric theological education without giving Christ the pre-eminence in the choice of content. But there is more. Jesus is the supreme model of the *methodology* of divine pedagogy. The disciples addressed Jesus as Teacher and referred to him using that term more than any other. As God's ultimate means of communication with humanity (Heb 1:1–3; Jn 1:1, 14, 17; Rev 19:13), Jesus became incarnate and taught not only with words but by his life. If the contents of the four Gospels are any indication, the disciples learned as much by watching Jesus deal with crises, interruptions and opposition as by his sermons. He is the Living Word, and woe to the person who presumes to teach in his name without displaying his righteous character![2]

My husband and I have often been asked for advice about training people for Christian ministry and missionary service. We find that few trainers have seriously considered Jesus as a model for their work. Many are committed to academic structures built upon rationalism. They wonder why the Christian leaders they send out with high honours cannot integrate faith and life, incite revival or deal redemptively with conflict. Yet they cling to their systems and discard the training model of Jesus as unrealistic and unable to appease the god of accreditation. It is grievous to watch Majority World church leaders slavishly following Western patterns of theological education which have resulted in tepidity and spiritual malaise in Western churches. I have had an excellent academic education for which I am grateful, but I would trade a good deal of it for a short period of intense, personal mentoring by a wise and experienced missionary who could say confidently, 'Imitate me as I imitate Christ'. We need formation, not just information. Knowledge without character is insufficient (see 2 Pet 1:5–7).

Theological education at its best is relational

There is no such thing as a disembodied idea, a pure Platonic thought unsullied by attachment to a person. The triune Source of all thought is personal. The knowledge which pleases God is always relational.

For relational learning to succeed, it must be faithful both to relationship and to truth. A healthy relationship is characterized by commitment to truth. If two people can relate to each other only by pretending that there are no significant differences in their outlooks, their relationship is illusory. Furthermore, their co-operative service must have a shared foundation in faith if it is to be established. There is no ethics without epistemology.

Not all truths are equally worth defending at the cost of a split in the body of Christ. Throughout church history and into the present, huge damage has resulted from anathemas vindictively slapped by one group of Christians onto others, some of which speak more loudly of the hubris of the anathematizers than of the doctrinal flaws of the rejected. A particularly moving moment in the video series *Vatican II:*

2 See James 2:26–3:1. Although in the following verses James addresses control of the tongue, his concern is with anger management rather than doctrinal purity. See also Matthew 23:1–15. Verse 15 is probably the least popular missionary text in the Bible. Taken with one of the most popular missionary texts, Matthew 28:18–20, it declares that verbal proclamation, however correct, is damnably inadequate without an exemplary lifestyle which flows from genuine godliness rather than desire for human praise.

The Faithful Revolution showed the embrace between Pope John XXIII and Patriarch Athanasias. Without a change of doctrine on the part of either the Catholics or Orthodox,[3] mutual anathemas were lifted which had separated the two communities.

The Divine Pedagogue is again a model for us here. He daily makes overtures to a world of people who do not understand, appreciate or agree with him (and he *is* the Truth; see Is 55:8–9; 65:1–2; Jn 14:6; Rom 11:32–12:2). The idea that 'God has two hands' might apply here as well, that God consistently refuses to give up on either truth or relationship.

It is not logistically possible for all learning to take place through face-to-face encounters with great thinkers, especially since many of them are dead! This limitation can be partially overcome by combining personal interaction with introductions to the thinking of others through a variety of media, including quotations, overviews, readings and videos. When we understand how other thinkers were shaped by and influenced by their own setting in history, we have a better chance of grasping how their ideas apply—or don't apply—in ours.

Theological education at its best is contextual

History was never considered an important subject at the modernist public schools I attended while growing up. Modernism, with its evolutionary bias, believed that humanity is always getting smarter. Advertisers inevitably married the words 'new' and 'improved'. The past was discredited, outmoded, superseded, passé. The only history worth studying was whatever directly contributed to political, scientific and economic attainments of the present.

But a carefully laid historical framework is crucial for contemporary ecumenical dialogue and for understanding trends in globalization. Without a grasp of history, discussion becomes dysfunctional. For example, an Orthodox Christian and a Sunni Muslim may find their attempts at inter-religious dialogue futile if they fail to recognize that the former speaks from Platonic assumptions while the latter builds his or her case on Aristotelian foundations. Most Protestant missionaries in the Middle East would be surprised to learn that the vehemence with which they are opposed by the Orthodox hierarchy springs in part from the wounds of the Crusades and the 'treachery' of the Uniate Churches.

For many years I lived in a region (Syria and Lebanon) where people have long memories—of the things they want to remember! Each religious, ethnic and political grouping tells its own history as though it had always been the victim and never the victimizer. I have seen a Muslim speaker in a small classroom of Christian Iranian, Sudanese and Armenian students express utter bewilderment that the students did not appreciate the tolerance and justice of Muslim rule. I have heard Lebanese Maronites say in one breath that the Shi'ites must be suppressed at all costs and ask in the next breath why the Shi'ites do not want to return to the Maronite-led prosperity of the 1960s.

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3 Here I refer to the doctrines which brought about the schism and its anathemas in 1054: *filioque* and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Of course, the reference in Vatican II to 'separated brethren' marked a new departure in Roman Catholic thinking and greased the track toward reconciliation.

In these settings, little effective communication takes place because the participants are promulgating or reacting to historical differences not understood by the other. Theological education at its best provides a fair and accurate historical foundation for informed communication. This is true when a seminary professor explains to future pastors the implications of Vatican II for relating to the local Catholic priest, or when an evangelist acknowledges to a Muslim interlocutor the evils done by Christians to Muslims at various times and places in history, or when a pastor teaches his congregation the reason for the use of the term *theotokos* so that they don't make fools of themselves when talking about Mary to their Orthodox neighbours.[4]

Theological education should be rooted in history, but not root-bound like a plant kept in a pot too small for it. Contextual theological education must relate the larger historical context to the contemporary and local context, or else it becomes anachronistic and stagnant. From some of my Orthodox readings and acquaintances, I have gotten the impression that the Orthodox Church has tended to become root-bound, confined to its past. To change the metaphor, it is a redwood bonsai: attractive and lovingly attended, but living far below its potential for growth and productivity.

Sometimes the Protestant church also becomes root-bound. In Lebanon and Syria, we constantly battled the belief among evangelicals that the ultimate goal of the church's educational ministries is Bible knowledge. Few among the dedicated Sunday-school teachers in the region can give an effective answer to the question: *Why* do we teach the Bible? The result for many Christians is an inability to think theologically about life, despite an impressive armoury of memorized verses.

It is tempting to brush aside many of the personal comments that people make when we are trying to communicate Christian truth to them. For example, I may offer a taxi driver a copy of the New Testament (in Arabic, the *Injeel*, or Gospel). Suppose that he responds by saying, 'Oh, are you an *Injeelia* [an evangelical]? I know some evangelicals'. If I ignore his acquaintance with evangelicals, I have missed a great opportunity to understand the person with whom I am speaking. Instead, I might ask him questions such as these: 'What sort of people are these evangelicals? How do you feel about them, and why? Do you know what the word *evangelical* means? Do these people live according to the Gospel by which they are named? What do you think the Gospel is about?' His answers will help me get to the heart of what he needs to know.

Good theological education also considers the contemporary global context. After an American missionary was murdered in Lebanon, a local magazine claimed that most evangelicals lived in northern Europe or North America. I wondered why the local evangelicals did not bother to correct this misconception, which effectively branded them as mere products of colonialism. It seems that they themselves did not realize that this claim was no longer true.

Students at Protestant Bible colleges and seminaries in much of the Majority World are still convinced that the only theology worth reading comes from northern Europe or North America. Furthermore, church leaders spend more time decrying

4 I admired my own Lebanese pastor's incorporating honest historical research into a sermon series and booklet on Mary, a topic usually avoided by Protestants in the region.

the evident encroachment of non-biblical sexuality, globalization and postmodern trends than in considering an appropriate response. If the church is to communicate to the world with self-understanding and with prophetic power, it needs to learn about its global context.

Theological education at its best is holistic

If our gospel is the gospel of God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, then it must address the whole of life.

First, the *message* we bring is holistic. Since Jesus is Lord of all, we dare leave no corner of our lives and societies unlighted by his presence. Too often, evangelicals across the globe have limited the subject of our teaching inside the church and outside it to variations on the theme of 'The Four Spiritual Laws', with allowances for the intellectual sophistication of our audience. Issues such as the environment, the role of the Christian in society and government, work and business ethics, public morality and even caring for the poor have been sidelined as peripheral to theology, as optional extras.

Second, the *method* of communicating gospel truth must be holistic. Whether in evangelism, discipleship or formal theological education, our choice of methodology ought to be consistent with Paul's admonition to 'be transformed by the renewing of your mind' (Rom 12:2). We seek not merely mental assent but transformed lives; not merely information but transformation.

Third, the *messenger* (or teacher) must model a holistic faith. There is an Arabic saying, 'If you've lost it, you don't give it'. Perhaps some of the appeal of traditional, rationalistic, classroom instruction for Christian educators around the world is that it makes few demands beyond the cognitive. Yet our best teachers are those who taught us integral faith by their own lives, including their struggles and failures. Modelling the integration of faith and life makes for better learning.

I learned from an Arab Christian colleague that the best way to encourage Arab Christians to evangelize non-Christians is to ask, 'I was talking with my Muslim neighbour about Jesus the other day and he said thus-and-so to me. How should I have responded?' This is far more effective than lecturing about the Christian's duty to proclaim the gospel. Likewise, my talking about or being seen with my Gypsy or migrant worker friends did more to break down prejudices than giving any number of Sunday-school lessons on loving all people. Most of the Muslim- and Druze-background believers I know were won to Christ as much by the testimony of loving and bold lives as by verbal witness, although the latter was also necessary. Missionaries who have lived in the Middle East for a long time have more credibility than short-termers when they challenge Arab Christians to live according to the difficult ethical teachings of Jesus.

Increasingly, people are resisting the fragmentation of their lives, even if that means experiencing life as an eclectic 'mulligan stew'. The example of a truly integrated person is highly attractive. Effective communication of gospel truth begins with the prayer of the communicator, 'Unite my heart to fear thy name.'

Theological education at its best is realistic in promoting its ideals

Among the first students my husband, Perry, taught in Beirut in the late 1990s were an Iranian couple. They were eager learners, and after graduation they went back to Iran fired up with what they had learned. The following year, a new Iranian student began to study with Perry. She enjoyed Perry's classes and could not disagree when he pointed out some of the failures of the church in theological education. But one day she took Perry aside and expressed her concern that other students, like the couple who had come to Beirut before her, would return to their churches, try to change too much too quickly, alienate themselves from people, get frustrated and want to quit the ministry and/or the country. Perry moderated his teaching after that discussion. He had no intention of giving up on his ideals, but he recognized that ideals must be passed on to students to use as invitations rather than sledgehammers.

When the good is turned into a god, it ceases to be good. In a fallen world, real goodness requires humility, patience and courage. How does one promote what is best and holiest? I would like to suggest the following answers: humbly, biblically, persistently.

Humbly. Dialogue with a rapidly changing world and with estranged fellow Christians requires us to listen carefully before we speak. It means admitting that we may not be the sole proprietors of God's truth, and that we may possibly have adulterated some of the truth entrusted to us. Millard Erickson has stated, 'It is one thing to claim to have absolute truth, quite another to understand it absolutely'.[5] We must be willing to be judged by the same yardstick with which we judge others. Humility enables us to see ourselves as others see us and to admit that our successes in achieving certain ideals are offset by blindness to our many faults. When we engage humbly in dialogue, we acknowledge God as the source of truth and righteousness and point to him, not to ourselves.

The humility necessary for dialogue is also required for theological education. The evangelist who wants to shine the light of Christ into the lives of others must be willing to acknowledge what light is already there, however dim, as Paul did in Athens (Acts 17:16–31). As mentioned above, the best teachers are willing to introduce their students to other teachers of the past and present and to acknowledge, where appropriate, their ignorance or errors. They also readily admit that they do not always live up to the ideals they espouse. In making such a confession, they invite the student to consider why the ideal is worth upholding despite human failure to achieve it with consistency.

Biblically. A reactionary attitude is just as liable to corruption as a conformist attitude. The corrective is the cry, '*Ad fontes!*' (i.e. back to the main sources). The Scriptures have a steadying effect, a way of reminding us of truths that we have conveniently failed to consider. The person who teaches the Bible and its ethical principles ought first to be a student of the Bible, intimately familiar with its grand themes as well as its finer points, in daily communication with its divine Author, 'rightly handling the word of truth' (2 Tim 2:15).

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5 Millard Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 39.

The church's political victories have often led to its greatest weaknesses, so much so that the question has been raised, 'Can the church succeed when it succeeds?' The Bible provides the church with the corrective of prophets as well as the pomp of kings, with a theology of the cross as well as a theology of glory. The wise teacher guides students, by word and living faith, in how to hold these components in wholesome tension and to use the Bible constructively in dialogue with an ever-shrinking world as well as with 'separated brethren'.

Persistently. Totalitarian governments spring up like weeds to choke the church. Repressive Muslim regimes control many countries, usurping both human and divine rights. The alternatives may be no less frightening, including civil war or morally and politically corrupt secular government. In addition to the threats from without, the churches face the disabilities and discouragements brought on by massive emigration, declining political and social influence, division, paralyzing fear, and the ignorance, apathy and worldliness of many of its members. Yet none of this nullifies Jesus' command to the church to joyfully proclaim the kingdom of God.

Our message to those within and without the church remains, 'Repent. The kingdom of God is at hand. Believe the good news'. We point beyond the failure-bound utopias of this world to the only regime in the cosmos that can live up to its promises and press releases. Our faith in the great King enables us to cling to his lofty ethical standards. Whether people acknowledge it or not, we live in a moral universe in which the right will be vindicated and the wrong exposed and punished in God's good time. Yet our knowledge of what he undertook to re-establish his reign of righteousness sobers us. It toughens us for the great spiritual struggle in all the arenas in which the church participates.

In the Middle East, we regularly heard glowing reports of revival and exponential church growth from other parts of the world. Our natural inclination was to compare these circumstances to our own, become discouraged by our seemingly futile efforts, and think about leaving the Middle East. I used to view this discouragement as a test of our ideals, and indeed it was that. But I have come to see that it was also a test of our realism, something that Paul and Barnabas tried to convey to their newly founded churches when they said, 'Through many trials we must enter the Kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22).

The realistic promotion of the ideal can be effectively taught only by people who persist in the face of overwhelming odds. Middle Eastern pastors who emigrate 'for the sake of my children's future' teach their congregations that God has no future for his people in the Middle East, or at least no future worth passing on to one's children. What do believers from a Muslim background learn from missionary church planters who temporarily exit the country whenever there is a shadow of danger? Those who leave think they are being realistic, but in fact they have conformed their lives to an unrealistic expectation that Christians should be secure in this world and that their children should not have to suffer for their parents' faith. Realism says, 'God reigns and his kingdom is near; it comes via Golgotha!'

The issue of church unity is one of many areas where the people of God must express their ideals realistically. The church is still sorely divided, and those who had set their hopes on organizational unity in our generation have become disillusioned. Yet there are in fact great reasons for hope. The church has been divided at least

since Chalcedon, but who would have dreamed that within our lifetime such an ancient wound would be cured? Or that within our lifetime the Roman pope and an Orthodox patriarch would embrace, a millennium and a decade after their communions had divorced? Or that within our lifetime documents entitled 'The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification' and 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' would be published, 500 years after the excommunication of Martin Luther? True, organizational unity is unlikely to happen in our lifetime (or that of our great-grandchildren, for that matter), but a unity of love, humility and honour is not only possible but imperative. We press on with hope but without illusions, knowing that the journey will be painful, costly and difficult. And like pilgrims in the Middle Ages, we invite others to join us on the journey. These become our students, and sometimes even our teachers.

Theological education at its best is prayerful

Years ago, a German studying at a theological college in the Middle East expressed his displeasure with some professors' practice of commencing class with prayer. In Germany, he informed me, students are told to leave their faith outside the classroom, even the theology classroom. The goal of learning was objective reason, to which faith was a barrier. The integration of reason and faith was a private enterprise, of questionable value.

On the contrary, prayerlessness is a declaration of independence from the Almighty. Prayer is an acknowledgement that I am both obligated to be an agent of God in the world and incapable of doing so, unless he enables me. When I pray with a Muslim for divine light on our discussion, I make clear to God, to myself and to the other person that both she and I are dependent upon the only wise God for guidance. When a pastor asks the church board or elders to stop in the middle of a business meeting for prayer about the subject at hand, he reminds them and himself whose business they are about and who alone can make it succeed. Education without prayer is the idolization of the human mind. Prayer, on the other hand, can be an education in itself.[6] To introduce prayer into any dialogue is to introduce into the discussion Omniscience in person.

Theological education as dialogue: concluding thoughts

The very first thing we learn about God from the Bible is that he speaks with immense creative power. As we read on, we discover that his Word not only creates but also transforms and sometimes destroys. As fearful as his speech may be, his silence is what the biblical writers fear most of all. Even when God's Word of judgement

6 That Jesus clearly believed in the pedagogical importance of prayer can be illustrated with three examples. First, he used the Lord's Prayer as a teaching tool in Matthew 6. Second, he stated the pedagogical value of prayer explicitly in his brief prayer before the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:41–42). Third, he tried to make prayer his final lesson to his disciples before his arrest—and he was disappointed when they slept through the class. No doubt he would have appreciated their sympathetic attention at this difficult moment, but he did not say, 'Watch and pray with me because I need the moral support'. Instead, he said, 'Watch and pray lest you fall into temptation' (Matthew 26:38–41). Of course, this is the Synoptic version. In John 17, Jesus really does deliver a prayer as his last lesson to the disciples.

comes via the prophets, it is a sign that God has not given up altogether on the conversation. He still says, 'Come, let us reason together'.[7]

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer reverses the usual way of speaking about education by asserting that in wholesome education, the subject of study calls to us, knows us and examines us.[8] He claims that only when the subject forces us to ask and answer penetrating questions about ourselves have we really learned. This is true whether the subject is whales, *The Merchant of Venice*, mathematical set theory, basketball, the *New World Symphony*, the rise of communism, modern French or ancient Greek sculpture. How much truer this is when the subject of study is the Lord God and all that pertains to him!

God still speaks. He calls us to know him and make him known. To do so with power requires us to turn all our dialogues into three-way conversations in which we allow the All-Knowing to examine us and invite our partners in discussion to do the same. A dialogue which involves God will be characterized by the following:

1. An awesome awareness that God is present and wishes to speak. Even if the other human party does not acknowledge God, our awareness of his presence will raise spiritual sensitivity. Experience and a gift of discernment will help the Christian be alert to the fact that some of what the human discussion partner is saying may be a response, positive or negative, to what God has already said to him or her.

2. A fearless and profound commitment to truth. Whether or not the other human party respects the Scriptures or the Holy Spirit, the Bible and its divine author will be perpetually informing our thoughts, words and responses as the dialogue proceeds.

3. Candor and creativity to go beyond repeating the same old arguments. The Holy Spirit has a way of getting us to rethink the questions and not simply repeat the standard answers.

An evangelist friend overheard a group of heavily covered Muslim women at an Orthodox shrine in a Middle Eastern country challenging the young attendant to explain how the Bible can say Jesus was the Son of God while the Qur'an vehemently denies it. The young man gave evasive answers designed to avoid religious controversy. A Bible verse came suddenly to our friend's mind, and responding to what she believed to be a divine urge, she quoted it and began to share the gospel. Sensing a warm reception, she asked the leader of the group if she could pray for them. They wept freely as she placed her hands on each lady in turn and prayed. The leader of the Muslim group said that she owned a New Testament, which she kept hidden in her home. After the Christian ensured that the Muslims knew how to get further Christian input, the women said grateful farewells. Soon afterwards, the attendant returned with religious authorities responsible for the shrine, who accused the evangelist of evangelizing (!) and told her to take her New Testament and leave. '*My* New Testament?!' she asked. 'Is it not *our* New Testament?'

In this incident, God was seeking to communicate truth. The evangelist heard him and spoke on his behalf, only to discover that God had already been speaking to the women. The attendant, on the other hand, was committed to a program in which

7 Isaiah 1:18. Note the context.

8 Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 105–6.

questions received standard answers, from which not even the Holy Spirit was allowed to stray. He forfeited his opportunity to be a channel of the Word of God.

The Divine Pedagogue is still speaking, still teaching people to know him. Some are more willing learners than others. It is every missionary's privilege to serve as a teaching assistant for the Master. It is with this high calling that we can teach under the tutelage of the Almighty.

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Reframing Spiritual Power in African Christianity in Light of the Scandal of the Cross

Robert Gyakye Coleman

Introduction

'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God', Paul declared (1 Cor 1:22–24, ESV). Paul's words were written to a church situated in a cosmopolitan city that was impacted by both Jewish and Greek cultural influences and confronted by the message of the crucified Christ amidst competing philosophical and religious paradigms. A crucified Messiah was notionally ridiculous for Jews (Deut 21:23) since crucifixion was an indication of God's curse. The Gentiles also deemed crucifixion the ultimate social and political humiliation—something reserved for slaves and rebels.[1] Thus, to claim that such a death showed God's supreme manifestation of power and wisdom directly challenged the assumptions that both groups held about divine activity and power.

In the African context, where spiritual authority and tangible demonstrations of power are highly valued, the implications of the message of Christ crucified encounter resistance reminiscent of that in the first century. Christianity has witnessed phenomenal growth in Africa, rising from 9.1 percent of the population in 1910 to 62.7 percent in 2010.[2] Despite this vibrant and rapidly expanding landscape, the implications of Christianity's message of a suffering and crucified Saviour often contrast sharply with deeply rooted African cultural beliefs and expectations of divine power. This article argues that the paradoxical nature of God's power, as revealed in the

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1 In a prosecutorial speech in his case against the corrupt Roman governor of Sicily, Gaius Verres, the Roman politician and orator Marcus Tullius Cicero made a statement that highlights the Roman view of crucifixion: 'It is a crime to bind a Roman citizen; to scourge him is a wickedness; to put him to death is almost parricide. What shall I say of crucifying him? So guilty an action cannot by any possibility be adequately expressed by any name bad enough for it'. See section 170 of book 5 of the Second Prosecution in Marcus Tullius Cicero, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell and Sons, 1903), https://perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0018:text=Ver.

2 'Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population', Pew Research Centre, 19 December 2011, https://pewresearch.org/?p=73541.

crucified Christ, profoundly challenges traditional African conceptions of power and spirituality. While this tension does not preclude the possibility of deep, authentic faith among African Christians, it does create a significant cultural and theological dissonance that can impede full commitment to the faith and contribute to nominal[3] spirituality among some African Christians.

Historically originating in Christianity, the term 'spirituality' possesses today a wide semantic range that includes transcendent beliefs, a holistic approach to life,[4] the manifestation of spiritual beliefs in mundane contexts such as the family and the marketplace, or an innate human capacity for—and openness to—the transcendent.[5] Alister McGrath explains spirituality as 'what a person does with what they believe', thus emphasizing that it goes beyond the world of propositional beliefs into the concrete world of actions.[6] In traditional African religious contexts, spirituality often emphasizes accessing and harnessing spiritual power for practical benefits,[7] whereas Christian spirituality highlights 'the living out of the encounter with Jesus Christ',[8] which entails conformity to Christ (Rom 8:29; Phil 2:5–8; 3:10), ethical transformation (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:22–24; Tit 2:11–12), and communion with God (Jn 15:4–5; 1 Jn 1:3). This contrast between traditional African and Christian spirituality underscores the tension that arises when the message of the crucified Christ—a message that prioritizes self-denial, suffering, and surrender to God's will—confronts deeply ingrained cultural expectations of divine power and immediate, tangible outcomes.

Given the fluidity of the term 'spirituality', it is appropriate to give a working definition of 'nominal spirituality'. I use this term with a nuanced meaning specific to the African context, as a form of religious adherence that accepts certain Christian beliefs and practices only insofar as they can be superficially incorporated into one's worldview without fundamentally altering one's core values or lived experience. It does not imply an absence of sincerity in faith conviction but reveals how someone committed to well-established cultural spiritual paradigms responds when confronted by the radical demands of the Christian message. Methodologically, the article draws on seminal works and recent scholarship related to African Christianity, Christology and contextual theology, and it frames the discussion through a critical

3 In missiological and ecclesiological contexts, the term 'nominal' generally refers to a discrepancy between a person's claimed Christian identity and their actual commitment to that faith and is often characterized by a lack of personal faith, church involvement or spiritual practice. For detailed discussions of nominality, see Tite Tiénou, 'Christian Nominalism: Causes and Cures', Alliance World Fellowship, accessed 10 March 2025, https://awf.world/resources-3-2/study/christian-nominalism-causes-and-cures/; Eddie Gibbs, *In Name Only: Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1994); Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 174–90.

4 Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4, 5, 8.

5 Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2023), 13; David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2024), 16, 17, 20.

6 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 2.

7 John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2015), 62.

8 McGrath, *Christian Spirituality*, 2–3.

hermeneutical analysis of these perspectives on how traditional African spirituality encounters and responds to the message of the crucified Christ. In examining this tension, the article aims to shed light on the challenge of nominal spirituality among African Christians and its implications for the future of African Christianity.

The theological contextualization project

African theology has shown seriousness—often with a vengeance, so to speak—in expressing itself contextually in a way that few theologies before it have done. It has appropriated images for Christ and his work that relate closely with African cultural notions, symbols and worldviews. Broadly, two approaches have been identified: one begins with African cultural concepts and then tries to match them with biblical parallels, and the other starts from the Bible's teaching and seeks corresponding African cultural themes.[9] Such efforts often include a reappraisal of African traditional religions in a positive light compared to the biases of early Western missionaries.

Scholars such as Charles Nyamiti, Benezet Bujo and Kwame Bediako have developed Christological models that use the category of ancestor to designate Christ in culturally resonant terms. Nyamiti refers to Christ as 'Brother-Ancestor *par excellence*', Bujo as the 'proto-Ancestor', and Bediako as 'the only real and true Ancestor'. They promote the idea that seeing Christ as the ultimate ancestor can bridge the gap between the African traditional worldview and Christian theology and make the message and person of Christ easier for Africans to appropriate.[10] This Christological approach has become one of the most discussed and elaborated contextual approaches for understanding Christ from an African perspective in African theology, but it is not without its detractors.

Another stream takes the form of Christ the liberator and insists that a message of liberation is crucial to African peoples who suffer poverty, oppression and social injustice.[11] Other theologians have viewed Jesus as master of initiation, healer, chief and elder brother.[12] African women theologians, such as Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musa W. Dube, have offered understandings of the Christ-event that take into consideration dignifying women in African Christian thinking.[13]

These academic efforts have struggled to gain acceptance in African churches and grassroots Christianity.[14] Curiously, during the same period when academic attempts to contextualize Christ have failed to gain traction in the wider African

9 Charles Nyamiti, 'African Christologies Today', in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 3.

10 Nyamiti, 'African Christologies', 12; Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, trans. John O'Donohue (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 79; Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Cumbria, UK: Regnum Africa, 2004), 31.

11 Jean-Marc Ela, *African Cry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986); Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).

12 Robert J. Schreiter, ed., *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

13 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000).

14 Nyamiti, 'African Christologies', 18; Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 23. See also a discussion of the results of Diane B. Stinton's fieldwork in her *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 132.

church, there has been an incredibly rapid growth of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, which tends to emphasize a clean break with ancestral traditions and practices (often perceived as demonic). This gives a hint that the appeal of Christianity to Africans may lie elsewhere. While African theologians have stressed a fresh view of the incarnation, or Christ becoming 'truly African' to redeem African cultures, African Pentecostals have emphasized the exalted, glorified Christ who sends the Holy Spirit with power. Whereas the theologians have often matched Christ's function with African cultural concepts such as ancestor, chief or elder brother in a bid to make Christ relevant, the Pentecostal practitioners have tended to be biblicist and have readily understood the biblical narratives of Christ's authority and supernatural power to provide needed interventions; they sense little need for elaborations on how Christ fits into the African world.

Recent literature on African Christology continues to stress the importance of making Christology applicable to the everyday lives of African Christians.[15] Scholarly discussions of the influence of African Traditional Religions (ATRs) on Christian theology show that it is viewed as both a strength and a challenge.[16] There is also ongoing discussion about recognizing the important role of African cultural influences while maintaining scriptural integrity.[17] All in all, despite the creative formal theological efforts and Christianity's rapid spread in contemporary Africa, largely due to 'Pentecostalization', the persistence of nominal spirituality remains a pressing concern.

The challenge of the African worldview

Central to the worldviews of many Africans is a holistic understanding of reality that sees the material and spiritual realms as deeply interconnected, which makes a neat separation between them difficult and often unnecessary. Many Africans live in a world 'densely populated with spirit beings, [good and evil] spirits and the living dead [ancestors]'.[18] The spiritual realm is believed to have power over the physical realm. Within this paradigm, some attitudes and mindsets create formidable challenges to the rooting of the gospel.

First, Africans have a keen sense of their finitude and limited capabilities. For many Africans, therefore, accessing divine power and/or manipulating any reservoir

15 See Babatunde A. Ogunlana and Benjamin I. Akano, 'Christology in Contemporary African Christianity: Ontological or Functional?' *European Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (2022): 13–18, doi:10.24018/ejtheology.2022.2.4.71; Peter Lee Ochieng Oduor, 'Christological Contextualization as a Parameter to Strengthen Theology Formulation and Enhance Christian Evangelization in Africa', *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 3, no. 1 (2021): 58–68, https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.3.2.411; Clifton Clarke, 'Towards a Functional Christology Among AICs in Ghana', *Mission Studies* 22, no. 2 (2005): 287–318, https://doi.org/10.1163/157338305774756612.

16 Godwin Akper, 'The Person of Jesus Christ in Contemporary African Christological Discourse', *Religion & Theology* 14 (2007): 224–43, doi:10.1163/157430107X241294.

17 Christopher Magezi and Jacob T. Igba, 'African Theology and African Christology: Difficulty and Complexity in Contemporary Definitions and Methodological Frameworks', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): 4590, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4590; Ogunlana and Akano, 'Christology in Contemporary African Christianity'; Akper, 'The Person of Jesus'.

18 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 97.

of spiritual power is critical.[19] Gerrie ter Haar notes, 'Ensuring access to spiritual power is a preoccupation of many people in Africa, both at the bottom and at the top of society'.[20] This power is sought for various purposes, including protection from malevolent spirits and human enemies, healing and physical well-being, success in life endeavours (such as regarding land and biological fertility, success in sports, business and love relationships), control over one's destiny, and sometimes manipulation of people. Some African politicians, like Presidents Mobutu of Zaire and Eyadéma of Togo, have been described as having cultivated spiritual powers, highlighting the fact that even politics lies within the reach of spiritual influence in Africa.[21] Furthermore, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu observes that African migrants, due to fear of witchcraft from envious relatives back home and other perceived threats to their success abroad, often seek the services of spiritual mediators in their home countries via phone or digital media, or locally in their new countries to mitigate them.[22]

Additionally, there is often a strong emphasis on finding quick, tangible resolutions to life's problems through spiritual rituals, prayers and consultations with spiritual leaders or diviners. In primal religious thought, such as prevails in ATR, religion is viewed primarily 'as a system of power', and religious living is understood 'as being in touch with the source and channels of power in the universe'.[23] Thus, the practical goal for a sympathizer of this system of thought is to ensure that they are on good terms with the power source so that they may receive the solutions it offers to life's problems when they need them. This motivates a pragmatic approach to spirituality that prioritizes immediate results over long-term personal transformation. Specialists such as diviners, healers and priests are believed to have 'the knowledge and ability to tap, manipulate and use' spiritual power in the cosmos to help people in this respect.[24]

Furthermore, the ontology of most Africans is defined by an anthropocentric conception of the world. This understanding causes them to 'look at God and nature from the point of his relationship with them', and it also illuminates their experience of evil.[25] Belgian missionary Placide Temples observed this anthropocentrism among the Bantu peoples.[26] Nigerian scholar E. Bolaji Idowu, however, seems to argue against such a categorization of ATRs. For him, religion 'addresses itself to Deity in a spirit of appeal and submission'.[27] Yet even Idowu acknowledges that these

19 E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (New York: Orbis, 1973), 189.

20 Gerrie ter Haar, *How God Became African: African Spirituality and Western Secular Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 12.

21 Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4, 88.

22 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Mediating Spiritual Power: African Christianity, Transnationalism and the Media', in *Religion Crossing Boundaries: Transnational Religious and Social Dynamics in Africa and the New African Diaspora*, ed. Afe Adogame and James V. Spickard (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 89.

23 Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 106.

24 Mbiti, African Religions, 21.

25 Mbiti, *African Religions*, 20, 62, 104, 281.

26 Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. Colin King (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959), 64–65.

27 Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 194.

religions have magic (which involves wresting spiritual power for personal interests) mingled in their rituals.[28] This confirms that ATR is often, as Zimbabwean scholar Collium Banda puts it, 'practiced for anthropocentric purposes'.[29]

These traditional worldview elements, discussed above, continue to exert significant influence on how Africans approach Christian spirituality and interpret their experiences. These elements consequently create tension with the message of the cross and the cruciform power of Christ.

The crucified Christ: A stumbling block?

Bediako, in arguing for appropriate contextualization of Christ for Africans, reads the letter to the Hebrews through the cultural lens of the Akan people (the largest ethnic group in Ghana) and observes, 'Hebrews shows Jesus to be the answer to the spiritual longings and aspirations that our people have sought to meet through our traditions'.[30] He identifies, among these aspirations, maintaining communal harmony, harmony with the spiritual realm, protection from evil, and conquering the fear of death. Bediako assumes a fundamental compatibility between the spiritual longings expressed in Akan traditions and the person and work of Jesus as presented in Hebrews. He does not capture one very significant aspiration: accessing spiritual power for *immediate*, *practical benefits*. This is an African longing that does not always align seamlessly with the Christian emphasis on submission to Christ's rule (Luke 6:46; John 14:15; Rom 10:9; 2 Cor 5:17).

A relevant demonstration of this potential misalignment comes from Paul Glen Grant's study of 19th-century Ghana, which reveals a more pragmatic response of the Akans to Christianity. Displaced by regional warfare, many Akans sought refuge in the small mountain Akuapem kingdom, and there they encountered German missionaries, whose message of sin and forgiveness proved largely irrelevant to their immediate concerns. Those positively disposed to Christianity approached it with a utilitarian mindset. As Grant notes, many 'experimented with Christianity in an attitude of pragmatic problem-solving'.[31] They were desperate and sought refuge with the missionaries. Granted, this does not discount their sincerity, nor does it necessarily make their conversions illegitimate. But we should not overlook the strong yearning in the Akan milieu, as in other African contexts, for power to engage various aspects of reality. As Asamoah-Gyadu explains, in African primal thought, the natural world is treacherous and thus humans stand in constant 'need of supernatural power for survival and salvation'.[32]

Grant's historical episode suggests that the relationship between Jesus and Akan spiritual aspirations is likely more complex than Bediako's interpretation implies.

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28 Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 189–96.

29 C. Banda, 'Ubuntu as Human Flourishing? An African Traditional Religious Analysis of Ubuntu and Its Challenge to Christian Anthropology', *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 5, no, 3 (2019): 214, doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2019.v5n3.a10.

30 Bediako, *Jesus in Africa*, 28.

31 Paul Glen Grant, *Healing and Power in Ghana: Early Indigenous Expressions of Christianity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 59.

32 Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Mediating Power and Salvation: Pentecostalism and Religious Mediation in an African Context', *Journal of World Christianity* 5, no. 1 (2012): 49, https://doi.org/10.5325/jworlchri.5.1.0043.

There are certainly points of connection, but there also exists a fundamental tension that deserves careful consideration. The pragmatic approach to spirituality shows up distinctly in contemporary African Christianity. Indeed, in African Christian communities, prayer meetings attract larger attendance when they focus on power demonstrations than when they are presented as fellowship or discipleship sessions; healing and prophetic services (where congregants receive prophetic directives for their personal lives from men of God) get greater prominence than teaching sessions on suffering's redemptive impact; and testimonies about God's goodness that highlight immediate miraculous interventions attract more attention than stories of faithful endurance through trials.

The nature of Jesus' earthly life and death confronts the human desire for power to use for our own ends (Mt 12:39–42; 16:4, 24–27) and instead calls for submission to God's will and rule (Col 3:23). This call can indeed inhibit the unbelieving African from accepting Christ as Lord and can hinder those who believe from fully committing every aspect of their lives to Christ's lordship, as doing so requires relinquishing control in certain cherished areas. The Christocentric paradigm directly challenges the anthropocentric orientation often found in African traditional religious worldviews. Consequently, African Christians raised within streams of Pentecostalism that emphasize a gospel of immediate, tangible power which can be wielded at will may eventually face a starkly different understanding of spiritual power when they have to deal with some of the common harsh realities of life—impassioned prayers for miraculous healing and deliverance that go unanswered or God's seeming silence in response to extended fasting and fervent prayers during dire struggles. The dissonance that these experiences provoke can bring the African Christian to question the nature of Christian power and salvation, and of the idea of victory over the evil forces often thought to be behind suffering. The salvation achieved through Christ's crucifixion is oriented towards concerns far more profound than the immediate material or physical needs which often dominate human (specifically African) anxieties. The African Christian therefore needs a paradigmatic shift from an anthropocentric to a Christocentric view of the world, where the desire to live with and for Christ replaces one's own desires for safety, protection, general material wellbeing, and vengeance.

Tragically, the focus of much of neo-Pentecostalism in contemporary Africa on the power of the Holy Spirit is motivated by the longing within the African world for power to control one's surroundings and to attain spiritual and material security. Asamoah-Gyadu states it unambiguously: 'Whether articulated in terms of the power of Jesus or that of the Holy Spirit, Charismatic Christianity speaks the language of power in which God turns impossibilities into possibilities'.[33] Elsewhere he comments that emphases in Charismatic theology 'on experience, glory, and power make it difficult for the full meaning of the cross in relation to Pentecost to be

33 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Pentecostalism and Coronavirus: Reframing the Message of Health-and-Wealth in a Pandemic Era', in *The Pandemic and the Holy Spirit: From Lament to Hope and Healing*, ed. Wonsuk Ma, Opoku Onyinah and Rebekah Bled (Tulsa, OK: ORU Press, 2024), 253.

sustained'.[34] Similarly, David Ngong observes that in this strand of Christianity, becoming a Christian means 'gaining power to overcome' life-diminishing forces.[35] Writing in the context of Nigeria, Jacob Oladipupo argues that there is parity in the conceptual understanding of power between African neo-Pentecostalism and ATR, and that this parallel has fuelled the fast growth of neo-Pentecostalism in Africa.[36]

Meanwhile, at its core, the message of the crucified Christ reveals a divine strength that manifests through visible weakness. The crucifixion, an event that seems to epitomize defeat and represent the ultimate display of powerlessness, becomes the very means through which God demonstrates his superior power over sin and death. God's power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9)—a concept on which Dietrich Bonhoeffer elaborates, 'God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us'.[37] Bonhoeffer further explains that God has not only suffered in this way for us but has also called us 'to share in God's suffering at the hands of a godless world'.[38] Jesus' crucifixion and his call for his followers to 'take up their cross' (Matt 16:24) present suffering not as something to be avoided at all costs but as a potential part of faithful discipleship (Phil 1:29, ESV). This clashes with the prevalent desire in Africa to use spiritual power to get rid of all forms of hardship.[39] The gospel also demands a shift in the locus of control and calls for surrender to God's will rather than attempting to manipulate spiritual forces for one's own ends.

Moreover, in the light of the cross, notions of success, victory and divine favour are radically reframed. Christ's willingness to endure the cross rather than to employ His divine power to avoid suffering becomes the very act that secures salvation for humanity. His humility and obedience unto death lead to His exaltation (Phil 2:8–9). This paradox demonstrates a different kind of strength—one rooted in love, compassion and self-giving—which also puts the personal suffering of the Christian believer in a different perspective. Embracing the paradoxical message of the crucified Christ, therefore, requires a real shift in worldview for African Christians. This can help them move from a desire for the immediate, tangible displays of spiritual power to a deeper understanding of God's power operating through seeming weakness and suffering, the ultimate expression of which lies in the crucifixion of Christ.

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34 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 106.

35 David Tonghou Ngong, 'Salvation and Materialism in African Theology', *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 1 (2009): 13–14, doi:10.3366/E135499010900032X.

36 Jacob Oladipupo, 'Power in Neo-Pentecostalism and African Traditional Religion: A Nigerian Case Study', *International Journal of Science and Research* 7, no. 7 (2018): 439, doi:10.21275/ART20183886.

37 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Works*, vol. 8: *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 535.

38 Bonhoeffer, *Letters*, 536.

39 V. Magezi and C. Magezi, 'Christ Also Ours in Africa: A Consideration of Torrance's Incarnational, Christological Model as Nexus for Christ's Identification with African Christians', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1679.

The persistence of nominal spirituality

Despite their numerical expansion, the continuous struggle with nominal spirituality among African Christians has prompted earnest reflection by Christian leaders and theologians across the continent. Intercultural theologian Chibueze C. Udeani asks agonizingly, 'Why has the Christian faith … not transformed the Africans and their culture just as it did other cultures?'[40] Nominal spirituality has been a continuing challenge for the African church and manifests in different ways, including dual allegiance, ethical disconnection and an overemphasis on material prosperity. These trends point to a gap between the profession of Christian faith and its practical outworking in the lives of believers.

Regarding dual allegiance, many professing Christians continue to engage in traditional religious practices, particularly during times of crises such as infertility, ailments or financial problems.[41] Richard J. Gehman observes, 'Sickness is one of the greatest causes for African believers to return to the traditional diviner who communicates with the spirit world'.[42] This tendency to revert to traditional spiritual practices in the face of persistent problems or suffering suggests a faith that is not grounded in a nuanced and distinctly Christian understanding of God's presence and power. It is a disposition influenced by the primal worldview, which generally regards suffering unfavourably and seeks to combat its causes. As Laurenti Magesa explains, in African societies, 'most of the time suffering, sickness, and death have their origin in witchcraft', and religious leaders gain influence primarily through their ability to counter 'acts, or even intentions, of witchcraft', which are deemed as corrupting all that is good and desirable in humanity.[43] The foundation of faith for many African Christians is not necessarily a deep trust in God's character but rather the perception of God as a powerful being who is always available to grant requests. Their dual allegiance often reveals not just a lack of complete trust in the sufficiency of Christ and the Christian faith to address all of life's challenges, but also a quest for immediate solutions. It demonstrates the need for a more robust theology of suffering within the African context, where suffering is endemic.[44] African believers need to understand that 'the God of the resurrection and the power of Pentecost must not be dissociated from the God of the cross; he is the same being who also identifies with weakness and shame'.[45]

Also, there is often a noticeable gap between professed Christian beliefs and ethical behaviour in social interactions, including business, politics and daily interpersonal dealings. This contributes to the corruption that plagues various African

40 See, Chibueze C. Udeani, *Inculturation as Dialogue: Igbo Culture and the Message of Christ*, Intercultural Theology and Study of Religions, vol. 2 (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), v.

41 Vhumani Magezi and Christopher Magezi, 'A Pastoral Evaluation and Responses to the Challenge of Spiritual Insecurity in African Pastoral Ministry and Christianity', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): a1734, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1734.

42 Richard J. Gehman, *African Christian Theology Revisited* (Chicago, IL: Oasis International, 2018), 45.

43 Magesa, *African Religion*, 68.

44 Sammy Githuku Wangonya, 'The Book of Job: A Challenge to African Spirituality Regarding Human Suffering', in *Christianity and Suffering: African Perspectives*, ed. Rodney L. Reed (Cumbria, UK: Langham, 2017), 227.

45 Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity*, 108.

nations with significant Christian populations, as professing Christians fail to live out the ethical implications of their faith in public life. With the 'neo-Pentecostalization' of African Christianity, an overemphasis on material blessings and worldly success as the primary indicators of God's favour has come at the expense of deeper spiritual formation. Asamoah-Gyadu et al. explain:

> There is a certain inability of prosperity preachers to challenge immoral sources of wealth and also to articulate a useful theology of poverty, pain, and suffering, since, as it is preached, those who come to Christ and fulfil their tithing obligations have the right to expect God to bless them.[46]

Furthermore, another manifestation of nominal spirituality in the African context has been the prevalence of magical thinking, where practices such as prayer, fasting or the use of anointing oil are approached with a mentality more akin to traditional magical formulas than to relational faith. They are viewed as guarantees for realizing needs or requests. Sometimes prayers are replaced with positive confessions/affirmations such as 'I am rich', 'I cannot be sick', or 'I cannot fail', and anointing oils are utilized with the belief that merely applying them guarantees answered prayers. While these practices resonate with traditional African spiritual sensibilities, their neo-Pentecostal expressions often reflect imported theological frameworks, particularly the 'word of faith' and prosperity teachings popularized by American televangelists.[47] This approach to the Christian faith often leads to seeking spiritual experiences, prophetic directions, and demonstrations of power without corresponding character transformation, faith in God's Word, or progressive obedience to Christ's teachings or a desire for these.[48] Prophets have increased in relative importance in recent decades and often their prophetic instructions, like drinking from 'blessed' water or planting of financial seeds in exchange for miracles, are followed without question.

Some may view nominal spirituality, as defined in the context of this article, as a stage 'in the conversion process' or the development of faith.[49] While spiritual growth is indeed a process, I would contend that much of the nominal spirituality in African Christianity, particularly the preoccupation with power demonstrations, is rooted in deeply embedded worldview elements that represent strong challenges to spiritual maturation. These elements go beyond superficial understanding or practice and involve fundamental paradigm shifts in how reality, power and suffering are conceptualized. Addressing these worldview elements is an essential aspect of spiritual growth and demands a paradigmatic shift in how power, suffering and discipleship are understood within the African Christian context. An empirical study by

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46 J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu et al., 'Religion and Values in Contemporary Africa: Christian Interpretations of Vice/Virtue Discourses in Ghana', *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46, no. 2 (2022): 164, doi:10.1177/23969393211000266.

47 Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), 31; *J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, African Charismatics: Current Developments within Independent Indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 204–5.

48 Simon K. Degbe, 'Sumsum Akwankyɛrɛ: Emerging Modes of Mediation and Appropriation of Spiritual Power in Sections of Ghanaian Christianity', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 24, no. 2 (2015): 289, doi:10.1163/17455251-02402011.

49 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 181.

Frimpong Wiafe and Harriet Clottey, for example, demonstrates that professing Christians in Ghana continue to view others through the lens of potential spiritual threat rather than embracing the freedom and security found in Christ.[50] When such deep-seated fears and insecurities which drive people to seek spiritual power are not adequately addressed theologically and through effective pastoral care, Christians are motivated to resort to traditional approaches alongside their Christian faith when they feel it is not protecting them enough.

Reimagining discipleship: Going beyond cultural contextualization

Contextualization has been a valuable and necessary approach in African theology. Nonetheless, the persistent challenges we have examined suggest that it alone is insufficient to address the deeper tensions between the gospel of the crucified Christ and the African worldview. Babatunde A. Ogunlana and Benjamin I. Akano opine, 'While Christ is being expressed according to the experience of the African people, their knowledge of Him should not be limited by such experience'. Space must be left 'for progression of their revelation of Him'.[51] Addressing the present challenges calls for a fundamental re-examination of how the gospel is presented, understood and lived out in the African context. This, I submit, should involve (1) reframing the understanding of power in light of the gospel of the crucified Christ, (2) developing a more robust theology of suffering, and (3) promoting a deeper process of rooting the faith that goes beyond surface-level adaptations to truly implant Christianity within African cultures. Practical approaches to Christian discipleship must be developed that integrate spiritual formation with social and economic empowerment and demonstrate the comprehensive nature of God's kingdom. Where power encounters are utilized during evangelism efforts, these strategies should maintain a crucial distinction: while demonstrating Christ's supremacy over spiritual forces (Col 2:15), they must ultimately point beyond momentary displays of power to the transformative paradox of the cross (1 Cor 1:18). This requires presenting Christ's victory not as merely another spiritual resource for earthly gain, but as the decisive event that reorients all notions of power towards self-giving love (Phil 2:5–8). Such an approach honours African spiritual realities while challenging their potential excesses through the cruciform pattern of discipleship

The communal and relational aspects of the gospel message should also be emphasized so as to align with strong African communal values. The prevalent model of Christian churches in many places across Africa, especially in neo-Pentecostal churches, has been likened to a hospital, in the sense that 'people are together in one building, but everyone is there to get his or her problem addressed' by a charismatic leader.[52] The communal aspect has become more transactional than relational. This

50 Frimpong Wiafe and Harriet Clottey, 'Ghanaian Christian Understanding of the Concept of Enemy with Reference to Psalm 35:1–10: A Case Study of Some Selected Churches under the Neo-Prophetic Strand of Ghanaian Christianity', *Valley International Journals* 2, no. 11 (2015): 1707–13, doi:10.18535/ijsshi/v2i11.05.

51 Ogunlana and Akano, 'Christology in Contemporary African Christianity', 16.

52 Hermen Kroesbergen, 'Religion without Belief and Community in Africa', *Religions* 10, no. 292 (2019): 3, doi:10.3390/rel10040292.

instrumental approach to faith, however, undermines the development of a genuine Christian community characterized by mutual support, shared burdens and a collective focus on spiritual growth. An antidote to this would involve the creation of robust support structures within Christian communities that provide both practical and spiritual assistance to members facing crises. This communal aspect of Christianity would resonate strongly with traditional African values and would simultaneously reduce the pressure or temptation to resort to traditional religious solutions in times of strain.

Furthermore, the shift from a transactional view of faith to one focused on transformation is essential for deepening African Christianity. Paul Gifford, in *Ghana's New Christianity,* has extensively documented the prevalence of prosperity-oriented teachings that often reduce faith to a series of transactions with God and promise material blessings in exchange for spiritual devotion.[53] Bede Uche Ukwuije has also observed that some Christians 'relate with God as bank customers relate with ATM machines. They insert their cards, press some buttons and money comes out. ... The machine must release money. God must do [a] miracle'.[54] The COVID-19 pandemic and its related suffering and death significantly challenged the prosperity gospel narratives and highlighted the need for a theology that addresses suffering.[55] When the Christian faith fails to work in the desired transactional way, many African Christians see it as inadequate or unsatisfying. This demand explains the popularity of power-centric movements in African Christianity and the struggle some African Christians face in fully embracing Christ's attitude towards suffering. For them, Christianity must *work*; it must be expedient. Challenging such mindsets, attitudes and teachings requires the development of discipleship models that emphasize character formation and conformity to Christ rather than just meeting felt needs and ensuring behavioural modification or ritual observance.

Ngong argues that the goal of theological constructions is to 'influence piety'. This statement emphasizes that true discipleship should shape character and encourage conformity to Christ.[56] By highlighting testimonies and examples of African Christians who have embraced the way of the cross and experienced profound personal and communal transformation, churches can offer compelling alternatives to the transactional model of faith. These narratives can serve as powerful demonstrations of how the gospel of the crucified Christ speaks to the deepest longings and challenges of African life. Jesus' paradoxical wisdom—that true life is found not in self-preservation but in taking up our cross and following him (Matt 10:39)—holds profound significance. It challenges the traditional African religious view of power and the transactional approach to faith, and it invites African believers into a deeper, transformative relationship with Christ.

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53 Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*.

54 Bede Uche Ukwuije, '"Dying, You Destroyed Our Death": The Significance of the Death of Jesus Christ for the Death We Must All "Die"', *African Journal of Contextual Theology* 3 (2011): 35, https://acjol.org/index.php/ajct/article/view/5138/4987.

55 Asamoah-Gyadu, 'Pentecostalism and Coronavirus', 247–64.

56 David T. Ngong, 'Theology as the Construction of Piety: A Critique of the Theology of Inculturation and the Pentecostalization of African Christianity', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 21 (2012): 345, doi:10.1163/17455251-02102010.

Conclusion

The challenge of fully embracing the entailments of the gospel of *Christ crucified* in the African context is complex and multifaceted. It calls for proper engagement not only with the complexity of African cultures but also with the depths of the gospel. I have argued that by reframing the concept of power, addressing the reality of suffering and emphasizing the transformative and communal aspects of the gospel, we can begin to tackle a formidable stumbling block to authentic discipleship, namely the gap between the message of the cross and the spiritual aspirations of African peoples. This will likely not be accomplished easily or quickly, but the potential rewards are immense.

A Christianity that fully embraces the paradoxical power of the crucified Christ while speaking authentically to African realities has the capacity to bring about deep and lasting transformation, not just in individual lives but among entire communities. It can offer true liberation from fear, a profound sense of identity and belonging, and a vision of human flourishing that goes beyond mere material prosperity. Besides, as African Christians continue to wrestle with these issues, they will have the opportunity to make unique and vital contributions to global Christianity by demonstrating how the gospel of the crucified Christ can take root in cultures that highly prize power and spiritual potency. This will offer fresh contemporary insights into the universal relevance and transformative power of the gospel.

The task before the African church is not to dilute the gospel to make it more palatable, nor to reject African cultural wisdom completely. Instead, it is to allow the gospel to speak prophetically to and through African cultures, challenging, affirming and ultimately transforming them.

ERT (2025) 49:1, 42–50

Glorification: A Biblical and Theological Examination

Jeffrey Anderson

Written works on what happens to a Christian after death frequently attempt to answer the question by examining different eschatological views (e.g. preterist, historicist, idealist, and futurist). Others focus on very generalized ideas of heaven or hell. Such approaches are not wrong, of course, but they have a downside. The first type of approach often devolves into controversy, while the second type is frequently so general as to be unhelpful.

It is unfortunate that so much debate surrounds discussions of eschatology, because the New Testament authors did not seek to write books that would be endlessly debated and unhelpful. Comparing and contrasting eschatological views may be of some value but often does not inspire hope, and overly generalized treatments of heaven and hell provide little practical benefit or inspiration.

The purpose of this essay is to inform and (hopefully) inspire the reader regarding the subject of glorification. To accomplish that aim, we will begin with the New Testament teaching that our salvation culminates in the transformation of our physical bodies. We will look at 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4, along with several other texts that stress the resurrection of our bodies. After that, we will examine more closely a series of contrasts in 1 Corinthians 15, followed by some implications of these texts. We will conclude by considering the internal longing that exists in the hearts of all believers.

The New Testament and the resurrection of the dead

God's ultimate goal for his people is to be 'conformed to the likeness of his Son' (Rom 8:29)[1] and 'with [Him] forever' (1 Thess 4:17). This is the fulfilment of the frequently repeated covenant promise, 'They will be my people, and I will be their God' (e.g. Ex 6:7; Jer 24:7). Moreover, our current state is only temporary, an interim period in which we wait for 'the redemption of our bodies' (Rom 8:23). According to Paul, this 'redemption of our bodies' is the hope in which we were saved (Rom 8:24). Christ's redemptive work was not merely so we would go to heaven.[2] However,

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1 Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical citations are from the 1984 New International Version.

2 As John Murray notes, 'Glorification does *not* refer to the blessedness upon which the spirits of believers enter at death … however glorious is the transformation of the people of God at death and however much they may be disposed to say with the apostle that to depart and to be with Christ is far better (cf. Phil 1:23), this is *not* their glorification. It is not the goal of the believer's hope and expectation'. See Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 174, emphasis mine.

for many, 'going to heaven' is the extent of what they know about the afterlife.[3] This is an unfortunate state of affairs as the New Testament does not leave us in darkness as to what will happen. Thus, the central goal of this essay is to describe what our eternal state will be like.

Biblically, the final stage of our redemption is the salvation of *the entirety of who we are, body and soul*.[4] This final condition is what theologians refer to as *glorification*. Glorification is the conclusion of God's redemptive work for his people: 'For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. … [and] those he justified, he also glorified' (Rom 8:29–30). God's intent is not simply to purify our souls (and/or spirits), nor is it limited to our eternal happiness in heaven. Rather, it includes a radical transformation of our physical bodies, by which they will be restored to our pre-fallen condition.[5]

Some may find the idea of our physical bodies being transformed or of spending eternity in physical bodies to be a bit surprising. But as Martyn Lloyd-Jones notes, 'Salvation is not complete without the resurrection of the body'.[6] When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the effects introduced not merely a spiritual malaise but also physical corruption such as sickness, injury and death. Their sin also negatively influenced the environment in which we live. The created order became hostile and relationships adversarial. As an antidote to this malaise, the New Testament places an unmistakable emphasis on the physical when it describes glorification:

> For we know that if the earthly tent we live in [i.e. our physical body] is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (2 Cor 5:1–4)

Similarly, Philippians 3:21 teaches that Jesus Christ 'will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body'. As a result, the final achievement of Christ's redemptive work will be the full restoration of our physical bodies. This will

3 We should note here that the word *heaven* is used differently throughout the New Testament. It can be an indirect term for God himself (e.g. 'A man can receive only what is given him from heaven', Jn 3:27). Heaven can describe God's abode (e.g. Mt 6:9, 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name'). Heaven is where our hope is stored (e.g. Col 1:5, 'the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven'). Thus, there are times when 'going to heaven' is precisely the goal, but not in the same sense as the term is typically used in the popular vernacular.

4 There is insufficient space here to explore the question of trichotomy versus dichotomy—that is, whether people are made of a body, soul and spirit (trichotomy) or just a body and soul, with the terms *soul* and *spirit* being interchangeable (dichotomy). For three standard works on this topic, see Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 203–10; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 2:42–77, 78–91; H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene, 1940–43), 2:15–19.

5 In a popular-level book, Randy Alcorn notes, 'God never gave up on his original plan for human beings to dwell on Earth. In fact, the climax of history will be the creation of new heavens and a New Earth, a resurrected universe inhabited by resurrected people living with the resurrected Jesus.' See Alcorn, *Heaven: A Comprehensive Guide to Everything the Bible Says about Our Eternal Home* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), Kindle location 287.

6 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998), 233.

occur when Christ returns for his people and God renews the heavens and the earth. On that day, we will be confirmed in holiness and death itself will be destroyed (1 Cor 15:25–26). We will be incorruptible.

We should be careful not to err by claiming either too much or too little about our glorified existence. Some have implied a greater knowledge of the afterlife than we possess. Reinhold Niebuhr cautioned against the temptation of speculating about the 'furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell'.[7] However, the far more common mistake is to say or assume that we know virtually nothing of our life in the eschaton, thereby relegating our future existence to pure mystery.[8] The New Testament suggests that there is much that we can and do know about glorification.

1 Corinthians 15 and the resurrection of the dead

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul addresses the importance of the resurrection of the dead and what the resurrection body will be like. He concludes that there will be a resurrection of the dead precisely because Christ himself was raised from the dead. He insists that this truth is of central importance to the gospel.

It seems that in their overrealized eschatology,[9] some of the Corinthians denied that there would be a *physical* resurrection. As Paul questions them, 'How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?' (1 Cor 15:12b). They found the idea of reanimated corpses (literally, Paul's phrase 'resurrection of the dead' means 'rising of corpses') too macabre and thus difficult to accept. Consequently, they rejected the notion of a physical resurrection. The Corinthians' concern was not that the resurrection lay in the future, but the idea that it was physical in nature.[10] At least some viewed it as a *spiritual* or metaphorical resurrection.[11] In contrast, Christ's

7 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2: *Human Destiny* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 294.

8 Alcorn, *Heaven*, Kindle loc. 8–9, calls attention to the paucity of information in Christian works on heaven.

9 Apparently, some Christians in Corinth believed that they were already living in the eschatological future. Thus, some husbands and wives were denying their spouses normal conjugal (sexual) relations (1 Cor 7), some women ceased observing the cultural norms of wearing their hair up rather than down as the temple prostitutes tended (1 Cor 11), and some believed the resurrection had already occurred—spiritually. Gordon Fee persuasively argues that this overrealized eschatology was an underlying issue throughout 1 Corinthians. See Fee, 'First Corinthians: New Testament Book Study', 23 lectures (Vancouver, BC: Regent Audio, 1999), Product ID: RGDL2931S; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 336–37, 498. For an exceptionally helpful volume on the situation in Corinth more generally, see Timothy B. Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19–102.

10 On this issue, see Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 106f.

11 Fee, 'First Corinthians', 17. The New Testament knows nothing of resurrected spirits, in the sense that people's spirits are raised to life after they physically die. New Testament authors do speak of spiritual resurrection in the sense of regeneration, e.g. in Colossians 2:13: 'When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ'. But these types of examples (see also Eph 2:1, 5, 6, among others) describe being born again. In that sense, it is possible to speak of spiritual resurrection, but in the sense discussed in this essay, the Bible only describes the resurrection of the body (*sōma*). Jehovah's Witnesses also view the resurrection as spiritual or metaphorical.

resurrection not only demonstrated God's victory over death but also showed 'the meaningfulness of embodied life'.[12] As a result, Christ's resurrection is inextricably tied to our own.[13] The apostle shows the fatal flaw in the Corinthians' thinking by pointing to the only resurrection of the new era: that of Jesus Christ.

The Corinthians' thought process seems to have been abstract and inferential. In contrast, Paul's was concrete and historical. Jesus died and was then buried. If he was buried, then his death must have been real, and if it was real, then his appearances to Peter, the Twelve and eventually the five hundred must have been because his physical body had been reanimated.[14] And if his body was truly resurrected, then we too will experience a physical resurrection. We will follow his pattern. This will occur when Christ returns.

Other New Testament texts and the resurrection of the dead

In 1 Thessalonians 4, the apostle indicates that death is no obstacle to the monumental change God has in store for his people. We are told that the souls of those who have died in Christ will come with him when he returns, and they will be reunited with their physical bodies: 'we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep [a euphemism for death] in him' (1 Thess 4:14). But this 'only makes sense if it is the souls of believers who have gone into Christ's presence who return with him and if it is their *bodies* that are raised from the dead to be joined together with their souls and then to ascend to be with Christ'.[15]

The Corinthians' error seems odd since the New Testament repeatedly insists that believers will be raised from the dead. Jesus tells us, 'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that … I will raise him up at the last day' (Jn 6:39–40; see also 6:44, 54). Similarly, Paul says that we eagerly await a Saviour from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ, and that he will 'transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body' (Phil 3:21). Interestingly, Martha, the sister of Lazarus, already believed in such a resurrection, as she told Jesus, 'I know [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day' (Jn 11:24). Both the righteous and the unrighteous will be raised to life, as Paul indicated when he told Felix that he had 'the same hope' as his accusers, 'that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked' (Acts 24:15).[16]

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12 Richard B. Hays, *1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 253.

13 David Briones, 'Already, Not Yet: How to Live in the Last Days', *Desiring God* (4 August 2020), https://desiringgod.org/articles/already-not-yet (accessed 29 June 2021).

14 C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 339–40.

15 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1019, emphasis in original.

16 Although not as pervasively as in the New Testament, clear hints of the resurrection are peppered throughout the Old Testament. For example, Isaiah 26:19 states that the 'dead will live … their bodies will rise' and 'those who dwell in the dust [will] wake up and shout for joy … the earth will give birth to her dead' (cf. Dan 12:2).

The heart of the matter

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle tells us what our resurrected bodies will be like. He begins with an agricultural example: 'When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body' (1 Cor 15:37–38). Then, to illustrate his point, he sets up several contrasts (or antitheses). He writes 'The body that is sown is *perishable*, it is raised *imperishable*; it is sown in *dishonor*, it is raised in *glory*; it is sown in *weakness*, it is raised in *power*; it is sown a *natural body*, it is raised a *spiritual body*' (vv. 42–44).

Perishable	vs.	*Imperishable*
Dishonor	vs.	*Glory*
Weakness	vs.	*Power*
A natural body	vs.	*A spiritual body*[17]

Consider the meaning of the words set in juxtaposition. If we describe something as *perishable,* we mean it will decay and die. In contrast, something that is *imperishable* cannot die or decay. Thus, according to the apostle, when we die, the body laid in the ground is *perishable*—it will die and decay. However, the apostle says our resurrected bodies will be *imperishable*. They will never wear out, suffer from sickness or grow old. In fact, as Grudem notes, 'since the gradual process of aging is part of the process by which our bodies now are subject to "corruption", it is appropriate to think that our resurrection bodies will have no sign of aging but will have the characteristics of youthful but mature manhood or womanhood forever. There will be no evidence of disease or injury, for all will be made perfect'.[18] Moreover, our resurrected bodies will 'bear the likeness' of Christ's resurrected body (1 Cor 15:49). This suggests that our bodies will reach the zenith of God's design for us. We will still be human, but our humanity will reach its culmination, and the effects of sin and the fall will no longer mar our physical form. We will be 'the pinnacle of [God's] creation and the appropriate bearers of his likeness and image'.[19]

The second set of contrasts is between dishonour and glory. Our current bodies are described as bodies of dishonour. This does not mean there is something inherently wrong or evil with our physicality. Rather, Paul is simply contrasting our present physical condition with the resurrected and glorified bodies we will receive. When the apostle considers the striking beauty that our resurrected bodies will have, he describes it by contrasting them with our present physical bodies. When compared to the extraordinary attractiveness our glorified bodies will possess, our present bodies are 'dishonorable' or 'vile' (Phil 3:21, KJV). Our renewed bodies will be marked by 'glory' (*doxa*).

We find hints of this glorious description of the future body in several places. For example, Daniel 12:3 tells us, 'Those who are wise shall shine as the brightness

17 There is an additional contrast in verse 49 between 'the image of the earthly man' and 'the image of the heavenly man'. However, that contrast is between Adam and Christ and does not address our topic as directly.

18 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1021, emphasis added.

19 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1021.

of the firmament, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever' (author's translation). Consider also the account of Moses coming away from the presence of God where 'his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord' (Ex 34:29; cf. Ex 34:33–35), or the transfiguration of Jesus where his 'face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light' (Mt 17:2). In each of these instances, the physical bodies are utterly resplendent, emitting a kind of luminosity.

The next antithesis is between *weakness* and *power*. Weakness is a defining feature of our present condition. Even the strength and fitness characteristic of youth are underscored by our limitations. 'Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall' (Is 40:30). Our present lives are marked by sickness, injury and death. Everyone who has sought to sustain their physical body through vigorous exercise, healthy eating and proper sleep has experienced just how quickly inertia can undermine their fitness gains.[20] The apostle summarizes all this in the single word 'weakness'. In contrast, our resurrected bodies will be characterized by *power* (Greek *dunamis*). Our resurrected bodies will not only be free from aging and illness, but they will also possess all the strength and vitality they were intended to have. This does not mean that our resurrected bodies will have the strength of a superhero, but they will possess 'full and complete human power and strength'.[21] They will have the strength necessary to accomplish all we seek to do in accordance with God's will.[22]

The final contrast Paul mentions is between a *natural body* and a *spiritual body*. Some have understood this contrast to mean that whereas we currently have a physical body, at the resurrection we will discard our physicality and be pure spirits. In doing so, they have misunderstood the contrast to be between the material and the immaterial—the corporeal versus the incorporeal.[23] However, as Alan Johnson notes, 'the proper distinction between the two types of embodiments is not material or physical versus immaterial or nonphysical *but … a body suited for the full functioning of the Holy Spirit,* the imperishable resurrection body'.[24]

Looking at the Greek text may be helpful. The contrast is between a soulish body (*psychikon sōma*) and a spiritual body (*pneumatikon sōma*)—that is, a body

20 When I was in my mid-thirties, my wife and I participated in our first sprint-distance triathlon. We trained for months in preparation—not just running, cycling and swimming, but strength training and healthy nutrition. However, if we missed several days of training, we could feel the lost fitness. It was extremely demoralizing to lose so much so quickly.

21 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1022.

22 Cf. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1022.

23 Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus' physical body was crucified for the sins of humanity but that he was resurrected as 'an immortal spirit'. JW.org, the official website of Jehovah's Witnesses, states that Jesus 'said that he would give his "flesh in behalf of the life of the world", as a ransom for mankind (Jn 6:51; Matt 20:28). *If he had taken back his flesh when he was resurrected, he would have canceled that ransom sacrifice*. This could not have happened'. See 'After Jesus' Resurrection, Was His Body Flesh or Spirit?' https://jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/jesus-body/ (26 February 2024). For more information on the material versus immaterial nature of the resurrected bodies, see Murray J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament, Including a Response to Norman L. Geisler* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 402.

24 Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 304–5, emphasis added.

dominated by this natural life (*psychē*)[25] versus a body dominated by the Spirit. A natural or *psychikon* body 'has to do with the present life in all its aspects',[26] while a spiritual or *pneumatikon* body has to do with the age to come. To be clear, there is nothing wrong or sinful with a *psychikon* body; it is simply ill-suited for the world to come. A *pneumatikon* (spiritual) body does not mean a body composed of spirit (as the Jehovah's Witnesses suggest), but a body designed for the needs of the Spirit in the coming age. Or to use the words of Gordon Fee, 'The transformed body is not composed of "spirit"; *it is a body adapted to the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate dominance of the Spirit*'.[27] In short, it is a Spirit-dominated body. The following chart shows the contrasts between our present state and what we will experience in the age to come.

Present State	**Postmortem State**
earthly tent	building from God
naked	eternal house
unclothed	heavenly dwelling
home in the body	clothed
away from the Lord	away from [the body][28]
in the body	at home with the Lord
destructible	immortal[29]

Even though we will undergo such radical physical change, our resurrected bodies will still be *our* bodies. In other words, God is not going to give us new and different bodies.[30] The resurrected body will be the same body, but it will undergo a heavenly transformation. The point is that our identity will be preserved. We will still be recognizable. We can see this illustrated after Jesus's resurrection when he tells his disciples, 'Look at *my* hands and *my* feet. *It is I myself!*' (Luke 24:39, emphasis added). Even after Jesus's body was resurrected and transformed, it was still *his* body. There is an organic relationship between the body that dies and is buried and the body that

25 See Margaret E. Thrall, *The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians* (Cambridge University Press, 1965), as quoted in Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 217.

26 Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 217.

27 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 786, emphasis added.

28 We will be 'away from the body' during the intermediate state. However, upon Christ's return, we will be reunited with our resurrected body. At that stage, we will be with the Lord and with our body.

29 Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 321.

30 Someone might object that if the natural body is raised as a spiritual body, it would appear to be a different body. Can we really say that it is the same body? However, Charles Hodge notes, 'Our resurrection is to be analogous to that of Christ; but in his case there can be no doubt that the very body which hung upon the cross, and which laid in the tomb, rose again from the dead. Otherwise it would have been no resurrection.' See Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 775. In fact, the very thing Christ was anxious to show his disciples in John 20:24–29 was that his actual body had been resurrected. Hodge (p. 776) goes on to observe that it must be the same body that died, or else calling it a resurrection makes no sense.

is raised and glorified. Four times in 1 Corinthians 15:42–44, we are told that 'the body that is sown … is raised'.

This is simply another way of reiterating the organic connection in the apostle's imagery between the seed that is planted and the new life from which it arises. 'God gives it a body as he has determined' (1 Cor 15:38). Lloyd-Jones states, 'Because of this doctrine we shall know one another. You will not lose your identity, though you will be changed through an astonishing miracle. Your identity will be preserved, it will be *you*, your salvation completed, your spirit already saved, your body then also perfectly redeemed, the whole person entirely delivered from sin and evil.'[31] Consequently, we conclude with Grudem that glorification is 'the final step in the application of redemption. It will happen when Christ returns, raises from the dead the bodies of all believers for all time who have died, reunites them with their souls, and changes the bodies of all believers who remain alive, thereby giving all believers at the same time perfect resurrection bodies like his own'.[32]

Implications

In several places, Paul contrasts this present life with the eschatological future. For example, in 2 Corinthians 4:17, after summarizing a list of debilitating hardships, he writes, 'For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all'. According to the apostle, the severe pain contained in this terse description is thoroughly ameliorated in light of the 'eternal glory'. In fact, he says that 'our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us' (Rom 8:18). Even the most intense pain and loss will be swallowed up in this glory. The apostle offers his own life as an example.

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul recounts some truly horrific hardships. He states that on five occasions he 'received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one' (v. 24). He underwent a form of torture that (gratefully) very few of us will ever experience. It would have left his back and sides a bloody, oozing mess, lacerated beyond the point of stitches. This was before the time of antibiotics, so the chance of infection would have been high. After several weeks, his body would have fought off infection and begun to recover. Then, perhaps just as the wounds had begun to mend and new flesh appeared, he was forced to undergo the same scourging again, for a total of five rounds. All that is summarized in a single verse, as just one of the hardships Paul endured. He also notes that he was beaten with rods, stoned and shipwrecked. Moreover, beyond this severe physical pain, he also experienced rejection by people, false accusations and sleeplessness. In short, Paul experienced tremendous pain and suffering. Nevertheless, in contrast with eternity, he describes all these hardships as 'light and momentary' and insists that the eternal glory in store 'far outweighs them all' (2 Cor 4:17).

Over the years, some have objected that such claims trivialize people's very real pain. On the surface, this concern may seem legitimate. Yet this is precisely why I went into detail about Paul's afflictions. His own suffering was not insignificant. Most people will not experience pain as piercing or pervasive as the apostle's. His

31 Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things*, 238.

32 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1018.

affirmations were not those of an ivory-tower theologian but the considered reflections of an apostle who not only suffered terribly but also encountered the risen Christ and received direct revelation from him. In light of eternity, even the worst pain and sorrow will be assuaged and forgotten. To claim that our present earthly suffering will eclipse eternal joy is to emphasize the ephemeral at the expense of the everlasting.

The upshot is that eternity should condition our present life. Our choices should be made with an eye to what will produce the greatest possible joy for both this life and the next 'with all the power; might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, [we are] capable of, or can bring [ourselves] to exert, in any way that can be thought of'.[33]

Our present yearning

Finally, Christians have a natural sense of longing for their glorified bodies. As we have already noted, when we die, we will be given a new, heavenly body (2 Cor 5:1), but 2 Corinthians 5:2–4 notes that 'Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life'. Paul sums up our present existence in one word, 'meanwhile'. But notice the emphasis: 'we groan, longing … we groan and are burdened'. This is the reality of the Christian life. Whether or not we can articulate it, there is a deep yearning for our resurrected and glorified bodies. The same desire is echoed in Romans 8:23, which says that we 'groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies'. This, Paul says, is what we hope for (vv. 24–25). Jesus' life, death and resurrection inaugurated the age to come. Believers walk through this world with their feet on the imperfect earth, yet all the while they breathe the eschatological air of the age to come. This eschatological tension produces a yearning inside us for our union with Christ to be consummated, so that we say with John, 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev 22:20).

Glorification is the culmination of all of God's redemptive work—his 'grand finale'. When God transforms our bodies and the consummation of the ages begins, the redemptive work of Christ will at long last draw to a close. The page will turn from this 'present evil age' (Gal 1:4) to the new act of 'the age to come' (Mt 12:32; Mk 10:30; Lk 18:30; 20:35). The house lights will dim, the stage lights will brighten and the play will finally commence. In the memorable words of C. S. Lewis:

> The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning chapter one of *The Great Story* which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.[34]

33 Resolution 22 of Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols., ed. Sereno E. Dwight and Edward Hickman (n.p.: B&R Samizdat Express, 1834, 2010), Kindle loc. 1725.

34 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2013), Kindle loc. 16,241.

ERT (2025) 49:1, 51–62

Does Embracing Global Theology Mean the Church Should Abandon the Historic Creeds?

Edward L. Smither

Introduction

Since theology involves reflecting on Scripture for our times,[1] global theologians should approach their work from different conceptual frameworks and lived realities. Theology ought to sound different around the world, from Jakarta to Sao Paulo to rural Tennessee. As Stephen Pardue explains in his recent book, the global church, particularly the church in the West, will be enriched and challenged by reading, listening to and engaging with global theology.[2]

But does embracing global theology mean the church should abandon the historic creeds? Are the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds so located in the Western context that they are not useful to the global church today?[3] Should the global church, as Kevin Vanhoozer asks, 'play by western Christianity's rules in order to do theology'?[4] In this paper, with a focus on the creedal material that became the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, I argue that the early creeds were forged in a global context and remain important for global worship because they faithfully describe the gospel for the one holy, catholic and apostolic global church. At the same time, the nature and purpose of the creeds encourage diverse expression, especially as their contents are unpacked and reflected upon in discipleship.

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1 See David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 99–100.

2 Stephen T. Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

3 See the arguments for a clean-slate (*tabula rasa*) approach to local theology in Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church,* 146–50; also Daniel Von Allmen, 'The Birth of Theology', *International Review of Mission* 64, no. 253 (1975): 37–55, and Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 228–46.

4 Kevin Vanhoozer, '"One Rule to Rule Them All?" Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity', in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 88.

Why creeds?

In some modern evangelical churches, we hear statements like 'We have no creed but the Bible'.[5] This statement (itself a rather creedal one) communicates a mistrust in extra-biblical confessions of faith. It's probably also a reaction to reciting what feels like dead, rote and unspontaneous liturgy. So why did the early church articulate concise statements of belief (*credo*)?

Responding to Jesus

In his important work, *The Way to Nicaea*, John Behr argues that creeds were a mere response to Jesus' question to Peter, 'Who do you say I am?' When Peter responded, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God' (Mt 16:15–16),[6] he made a creedal statement—one that followed the pattern of many statements of belief about God and his ways in the Old and New Testaments (see Deut 6:4; Rom 1:3–4; 1 Cor 8:5–6; 15:3–4; Phil 2:5–11; 1 Tim 2:5–6; 1 Pet 3:18–22).[7] As followers of Jesus strived to make sense of who God was and what he had done for them, particularly in the work of salvation, they chose to articulate their faith through creedal statements. Donald Fairbairn and Ryan Reeves note that early on, these statements assumed a three-part structure, emphasizing the persons and work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in salvation.[8]

Behr argues that for the early Christians, such statements showed that there was 'one right faith' and 'one gospel'.[9] Although Scripture contains many creedal statements, Behr argues further that the early creeds were based largely on 1 Corinthians 15:3–4: 'For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve'.

What Christians ought to believe

In his work on the Apostles' Creed, Michael Bird argues that the creed's purpose is to sum up what Christians ought to believe. Bird asserts that 'the Apostles' Creed is probably the best syllabus ever devised for teaching basic Christian beliefs … a bullet-point summary for what Christians believe about God, Jesus, the church, and the life to come.'[10] Countering the assertion that creeds are extra-biblical, Bird

5 See Michael F. Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostles' Creed* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 13–17; Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 12.

6 Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

7 See John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea: Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2001), 11, 52; also Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 21–25.

8 See Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions,* 30–32.

9 Behr, *Way to Nicaea,* 14–15, 46.

10 Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 13.

echoes Martin Luther's maxim that the Apostles' Creed is 'the Bible in miniature'.[11] He writes that creeds are 'biblically generated tradition that meets with the consensus of the universal church about what the main teachings of the Christian faith are'.[12] For the work of discipleship and Christian formation, Bird adds that the creeds 'conveniently sum up the main truths of the Christian faith and put them into a concise narrative that is meaningful and memorable … [they] are a portable story, a short summary of the scriptural storyline that we can carry with us wherever we go'.[13]

Creeds developed in the early church because of its mission of obeying our Lord's command to 'make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Mt 28:19–20). As the church proclaimed the good news and seekers sought baptism, the community was forced to articulate the basics of what it meant to be a Christian. In the first three centuries, pre-baptismal catechesis (instruction in the faith) could take as long as three years. By the fourth century, it had been streamlined into a forty-day experience during the season of Lent, followed by baptisms at Easter.[14]

By the late first and early second century, the *Didache* (ca. 70–120) was published as a discipleship manual for the church in Syria. In the early third century, the Apostolic Constitutions—a question-and-answer format on the essentials of the faith—was developed in Rome as an early baptismal catechism. Many church fathers, including Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386), Ambrose of Milan (d. 397), John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–ca. 428), and Augustine of Hippo (354–430), preached homilies on baptism and catechism.[15] At the request of the church at Carthage, Augustine produced the catechetical manual *Instructing Beginners in Faith.* The global church in the ancient world was expanding. New believers were being discipled and baptized. This reality pushed the church to clarify what Christians ought to believe.

The rule of faith

As the early church strived to remember and proclaim the teachings of Christ given to the apostles (orthodoxy), the church fathers regularly highlighted the rule of faith (*regula fidei)* or the canon of truth in their writings. Although there were no fixed creeds in the first or second century, Fairbairn and Reeves show that there were

11 Cited in Eshetua Abate, 'Confessing Christ in the Apostle's Creed', in *Christian Theology in African Context: Essential Writings of Eshetua Abate* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2015), 81.

12 Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 23.

13 Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 37; see also Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions*, 3–5.

14 See Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001); William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995); and Edward L. Smither, 'Learning from Patristic Evangelism and Discipleship', in *The Contemporary Church and the Early Church: Case Studies in Ressourcement*, ed. Paul Hartog (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), 27–49.

15 See Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions*, 32; Yarnold, *Awe-Inspiring Rites*, 67–250; Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 41.

'creed-like affirmations embedded in longer writings'.[16] Bryan Liftin defines the rule of faith as 'a confessional formula (neither fixed in wording nor in content, yet following the same general pattern) that summarized orthodox beliefs about God and Christ in the world'.[17] Describing the rule's content as 'presumed' and 'intuitive', Liftin asserts that its purpose was to summarize what baptismal candidates should believe.[18] From their exhaustive study of creedal material in early Christianity, Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss conclude that the rule of faith minimally stated belief in 'one God, creator of heaven and earth; his only Son, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pilate, raised from the dead, and returning to judge the world; the Holy Spirit, who inspired the prophets and gives life to the church'.[19]

From his work on the rule of faith in early Christian writings, Litfin identifies thirteen obvious places in the church fathers where material related to the rule of faith appears. The authors are diverse: Ignatius of Antioch (d. 110); Origen of Alexandria (185–253); Justin Martyr (d. 165) of Samaria, Ephesus and Rome; Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 160–ca. 220); and the anonymous *Didascalia Apostolorum,* a Greek work developed in Syria around 230.[20] The earliest and most complete rule of faith statement appears in Irenaeus of Lyons' (ca. 120–ca. 202) *Against All Heresies,* an apologetic against Gnosticism. Irenaeus writes:

> Believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; who, because of His surpassing love towards His creation, condescended to be born of the virgin, He Himself uniting man through Himself to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rising again, and having been received up in splendor, shall come in glory, the Savior of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and sending into eternal fire those who transform the truth, and despise His Father and His advent.[21]

For Irenaeus and other fathers, the purpose of the rule of faith was to offer a 'metanarrative' guide to salvation history from the Old and New Testaments, which also became a lens through which to interpret Scripture.[22] When Origen was challenged

16 Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions,* 20–21, 33, 35.

17 Bryan M. Litfin, 'Learning from the Patristic Rule of Faith', in *The Contemporary Church and the Early Church*, 79; see also Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe,* 33; Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Daniel J. Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture: A Mere Evangelical Account* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 142.

18 Litfin, 'Learning from the Patristic Rule of Faith', 79.

19 Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 10, cited in Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions,* 26.

20 See Ignatius, *To the Trallians* 9; *To the Smyrneans* 1; Origen, *On First Principles* 1 (preface 4–10); Justin, *First Apology* 13; Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 13; *Against Praxeas* 2; also Litfin, 'Learning from the Patristic Rule of Faith', 80–94; Behr, *Way to Nicaea,* 83, 98; Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions,* 26–30.

21 Irenaeus, *Against All Heresies* 3.4.1–2, https://logoslibrary.org/irenaeus/heresies/304.html.

22 Litfin, 'Learning from the Patristic Rule of Faith', 84.

for his allegorical readings of Scripture, he countered that all speculation was subject to the rule of faith.[23]

While the rule of faith was rather fluid, its place in the early Christian writings functioned as a 'gradual' development towards the fixed creeds.[24] Bird summarizes, 'The purpose of the creeds was to take the overarching narrative of the *regula fidei* and translate it into a list of key beliefs to be affirmed'.[25]

For discipleship and apologetics

While the early creeds communicated what new Christians ought to believe at baptism and throughout their faith journey, they also functioned as an apologetic against heresies, clarifying some of the early church's big questions. When the Apostles' Creed declares that Jesus was 'born of the Virgin Mary / suffered under Pontius Pilate / was crucified, died, and was buried', it affirms Jesus's divinity and real humanity, challenging Docetic claims. The Nicene Creed's affirmation that Jesus was 'eternally begotten of the Father / God from God, Light from Light / true God from true God / begotten, not made / of one Being with the Father' challenged the Arian claim that Jesus was not eternal or co-equal with the Father. The Nicene declaration that the Holy Spirit is 'the Lord, the giver of life / who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified' confronted the late fourth-century Pneumatochian claims that the Holy Spirit was not divine.[26]

At the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), the church wrestled with language (*ousios, homoousios, hypostasis*) to clarify the rule of faith, particularly in the face of the Arian heresy. Though the Nicene Creed has been criticized as overly philosophical and Hellenistic, the creed belonged to the church. It served as a means (albeit a rigorous one) for everyday believers to confess their faith at baptism and throughout their lives.[27] This creedal language was forged appropriately in a fourth-century local context. Since the heresies that the early church faced have re-emerged in later periods and contexts, the early church's response provides a model for confronting false teaching, which aids the global catholic church today. In many liturgical churches today, the Nicene Creed is recited following the sermon—a reminder that the ministry of the Word (and its fallible preachers) ought to be subject to the rule of faith.

A summary of the gospel

In short, we have the creeds (affirmations of belief) as a statement of the basics of the gospel—what Christians ought to believe. Each line of the creed can be expanded

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23 Origen, *On First Principles* 1 (preface 4–10); Litfin, 'Learning from the Patristic Rule of Faith', 86, 97–98; Behr, *Way to Nicaea,* 36; Vanhoozer, 'One Rule to Rule Them All?' 119; Bryan Litfin, 'Apostolic Tradition and the Rule of Faith in Light of the Bauer Thesis', in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis,* ed. Paul A. Hartog (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 162–65.

24 Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions*, 20–21.

25 Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 34.

26 See Stephen Hildebrand, 'Introduction', in St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 21; Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe,* 23–24; Behr, *Way to Nicaea,* 17–22; Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions,* 70–71, 76.

27 See Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions,* 62–64, 72–74, 79.

upon for rich Bible study and constructive theology. In this sense, the Chalcedonian definition of the natures of Christ was an unpacking of the Nicene Creed, not a new creed.[28] However, the creeds are not meant to be a deep dive into systematic theology.[29] Rather, they merely answer the questions of who God is and what he has done for sinners. This gospel affirmation is big enough for the whole world, unifying Christians from all cultures and languages.

The creeds and catholicity

Pardue rightly argues that global theology should engage 'the worldwide church' and 'the Great Tradition'.[30] Local theologies run aground when they dismiss the reality of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church—*one church* with *one gospel*. Accordingly, we should not abandon the historic creeds, because they are markers of catholicity. Vincent of Lerins (d. ca. 445) famously described catholic orthodoxy as 'that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all'.[31]

Before the adoption of the earliest fixed creeds, Irenaeus argued that the rule of faith exhibited catholicity for the second-century global church. Irenaeus was a Greek speaker from Smyrna who migrated to Gaul, where he preached and ministered in Latin and Gaelic. He also attended to church matters in Rome. He taught, preached and worked out his thoughts about the rule of faith between those contexts. In addition to his own experience, Irenaeus asserted that the rule of faith was believed by churches in Gaul, Germany, Spain, Libya and around the known world.[32] John Behr notes that for Irenaeus, 'The tradition of the apostles is manifest in all the churches throughout the world, preserved by those to whom the apostles entrusted the well-being of the churches founded upon the gospel'.[33] Vanhoozer concludes that although the rule of faith was articulated in particular contexts and with fluid wording, the rule became a catholic statement for the whole church.[34]

The fourth-century Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is perhaps the greatest statement of catholicity. Apart from the controversial filioque clause, the creed is affirmed by the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant communions.[35] Aiding global Christians since the fourth century to 'know the certainty of the things [they] have been taught' (Lk 1:4), to 'reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God' (Eph 4:13), and 'to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people' (Jude 3), the Nicene Creed demonstrates global unity around the one gospel.[36]

The Council of Nicaea of 325 was an early exercise in global theology. Andrew Walls has argued that the first Nicene Creed was overly Greek—constructed in a

28 See Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions,* 80–108.
29 See Vanhoozer, 'One Rule to Rule Them All?' 88–91.
30 Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church*, 10, 115–66.
31 Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* 2.6, https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf211/npnf211.iii.iii.iii.html.
32 Irenaeus, *Against All Heresies*, 1.10.2; Behr, Way to Nicaea, 37.
33 Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 42.
34 Vanhoozer, 'One Rule to Rule Them All?' 118.
35 See Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe, 25; Fairbairn and Reeves, Story of Creeds and Confessions*, 11.
36 See Bird, *What Christians Ought to Believe*, 14.

Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire, crafted by Greek thinkers and characterized by Greek concepts.[37] Though the creed was produced in Greek and leveraged Greek philosophical notions such as *ousios* (essence) and *homoousios* (shared essence), the Arian controversy was born in Egypt because of the preaching of Arius (256–336), a presbyter from Libya. The primary bishop-theologian who opposed Arius and clarified trinitarian thought after the council, Athanasius (ca. 296–373), was probably from a Coptic background in Upper Egypt where oral monastic theology flourished. After his condemnation at the local Council of Alexandria in 318, Arius fled to Asia Minor and was received by Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. 341), a distant relative of Emperor Constantine (ca. 272–337) and most likely from Syria. Constantine called the first ecumenical council at the recommendation of his Spanish theological advisor, Hosius of Cordoba (ca. 256–359). Though the council proceedings took place in Greek, Constantine addressed the gathered bishops in Latin. These key players at the council could all communicate in Greek, but they were a culturally diverse group representing the global church from Africa, Asia and Europe.

Around 300 bishops participated in the council, and they represented a diverse fourth-century global church. Though most of the bishops hailed from within the Roman Empire, they included Greek-speaking bishops from Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor and Greece, as well as Latin speakers from Spain, Gaul and Africa. From outside the Roman Empire, bishops from Armenia, the Gothic regions, Georgia and Persia also attended. Bishop John of Persia signed the Nicene Creed on behalf of the churches of Persia and India; Bishop Jacob of Nisibis represented the Syriac-speaking Church of the East.[38]

The building material for the Nicene Creed was the local baptismal creeds from the global church that reflected the rule of faith. Following the fourth-century ecumenical councils of 325 and 381, these diverse churches (e.g., Syriac, Persian, Greek, Latin) continued to declare the creed in their liturgies as a faithful summary of the gospel. At the Synod of Isaac in 410, which assembled in the capital of Persia, the Church of the East bishops once again affirmed the Nicene Creed. Though the Coptic, Ethiopian, Syriac and Persian churches rejected the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's two natures due to the overly Greek manner in which it was articulated, these communions continued to affirm the Nicene Creed.[39] That is, while rejecting a local expression of Greek contextual theology (Chalcedon), the diverse global church remained catholic about the gospel described in the creed.

37 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement from the West: A Biography from Birth to Old Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 242.

38 See Dale T. Irvina and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1: *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 176; Glen L. Thompson, *Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), 17.

39 See Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 155, 162; Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions,* 95–96, 104–6.

Creeds, catholicity, and ancestral faith

The global church, particularly the body of Christ in the Majority World, demonstrates wisdom when engaging the historic creeds. In their work on evangelical theology, Uche Anizor, Rob Price and Hank Voss assert that we must understand both contemporary global theology and historic Christian teaching. They write, 'We are responsible to engage the global church in conversation for some of the same reasons we would engage the historical church: to correct our myopia, strengthen our reading of Scripture, and enrich our doctrinal understanding'.[40]

Because Asian and African cultures tend to remember and honour ancestors, churches in these contexts are more likely to value historic Christian teaching, including the creeds, as they cultivate their Christian identity today. They respect and affirm what Jaroslav Pelikan called 'the living faith of the dead'.[41] In *Grassroots Asian Theology,* Singaporean Chinese theologian Simon Chan argues, 'For a local theology to be authentically Christian, it must have substantial continuity with the larger Christian tradition'.[42] Similarly, Nigerian theologian Victor Ezigbo adds that the Great Tradition should function as the 'raw material' for local theology today. Ghanaian luminary Kwame Bediako (1945–2008) particularly appreciated the second-century church fathers because they wrestled with similar challenges to those faced by the twentieth-century African church. Beyond merely exporting patristic thought to modern Africa, Bediako urged his colleagues to 'read the Christian fathers in their contexts with new eyes … [and] ask fresh questions of the Christian tradition of the past'.[43] The church fathers are wise ancestors and dialogue partners in the task of theology today.

By valuing and affirming the historic creeds, modern evangelical churches in the Majority World can also find common ground with the ancient Christian communities. This is particularly true in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, where traditions such as the Syrian Orthodox, Melkite (Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan), Assyrian Church of the East (Iraq), the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, and the Coptic Church (Egypt) continue to worship. Mounir Anis, the former Anglican bishop of Egypt, affirms that unity around the 'ancient creeds' has led to 'mutual respect' and 'excellent ecumenical relations' between his diocese and the Coptic and Roman Catholic churches in Egypt.[44] Though clear theological differences exist between Anglican and Coptic Christians, they are united in the gospel when looking to the wisdom of the historic creeds.

Following Pardue's thesis, Western Christians have much to learn from Asian and African Christians about valuing the Great Tradition in doing theology. From a

40 Uche Anizor, Rob Price and Hank Voss, *Evangelical Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 227, cited in Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church,* 124.

41 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

42 Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 11; also Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church*, 156.

43 Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992), xii, cited in Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church*, 161.

44 Mounir Anis, 'A Middle Eastern Perspective: Rooted in Egyptian Soil', in *The Future of Orthodox Anglicanism*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 35.

cultural perspective, North Americans often value entrepreneurship and innovation over tradition. Declarations like 'no creed but the Bible' were born in the American free-church tradition.[45] Engaging the historic creeds challenges Western theological mistakes such as 'biblicism' and 'individualism'.[46] Pardue correctly asserts that 'contextual theologies [including Western contextual theologies] engaging tradition are far more likely to avoid the excesses and fads of the present'.[47] Some of these excesses and fads are heresy—including prosperity theology, Christian nationalism and diminishing the place of the Old Testament in the canon of Scripture.

Creeds, catholicity, and plurality

Given that local theology should reflect the goodness of global cultures—their worldview, logic and vocabulary—should the historic creeds be reworded to reflect this? While the overall shape of the creeds (who God is and what God has done for us) should remain intact because of the incarnational nature of theology and the creeds, some latitude for updating their language can be granted.[48] For example, in many global churches, the original Apostles' Creed line 'he descended to hell' is rendered 'he descended to the dead'.[49] Some churches, wanting to clarify their Reformation convictions, substitute 'one holy universal church' in place of 'one holy catholic church'. Other churches have modernized the language of the creeds.

In 1960, missionaries with the Congregation of the Holy Ghost in East Africa worked with the Maasai people to craft their own creed:

> We believe in the one High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and everything good in it. He created man and wanted man to be happy in the world. God loves the world and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light. God promised in the book of his word, the Bible, that he would save the world and all nations and tribes.
>
> We believe that God made good his promise by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He was buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from that grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.
>
> We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love, and share the bread together in love, to announce the good news to

45 See Trueman, *Creedal Imperative*, 24–31.
46 Vanhoozer and Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*, 146.
47 Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church*, 158.
48 Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church*, 19, 82, 102.
49 Matthew Y. Emerson, *He Descended to the Dead: An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019).

> others until Jesus comes again. We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe. Amen.[50]

The Maasai creed follows the trinitarian framework and tells the story of salvation. While doing so in a very Maasai way (even referencing hyenas), it does not present another gospel.

Another possibility is that while the language of the historic creeds may remain the same, local churches can strategically unpack the creeds line by line through discipleship. Augustine's work *On Faith and the Creed* is a great example. Though still a presbyter, Augustine was invited to teach the gathered bishops at the Council of Hippo of 393 on the foundations of the Christian faith. For his curriculum, he used the Milanese version of the Old Roman Symbol (what became the Apostles' Creed), which he understood to be the same as the rule of faith.[51] His aim was to present the creed as a framework for teaching the faith and as a means for understanding and interpreting Scripture. His presentation served as a model for the bishops, something they could use to disciple the faithful in their contexts.[52] At the conclusion of his talk, Augustine said as much:

> This is the faith. Consisting of a few short sentences and expressed in a creedal form to be firmly professed, which is given to those newly converted to the Christian faith. These brief articles have become well known to believers who by putting their faith in them, become subject to God. By being subject to God they can live righteous lives and through such lives purify their hearts. Then, having purified their hearts, they may succeed in understanding what they believe.[53]

Explaining the creed line by line, he emphasized the Father as creator; Jesus as the divine Word and incarnate Son of God (human and divine); Christ's death, burial, resurrection and ascension; the Trinity; the church; the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. He concluded his summary with an admonition to live the Christian life.[54]

Elaborating the creed through a rich engagement with Scripture, Augustine addressed some of the heretical challenges to the church in his day, including Manichaenism, Arianism, Apollinarism and Docetism. Though he was training bishops who may not have had the benefit of a liberal-arts education, he leveraged all his philosophical and theological training to make his case and equip his colleagues.[55] He wanted to make sure that these heretical groups did not wrongly use the language of the creeds for their purposes. Though the Milanese Creed did not

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50 Cited in Emily J. Choge Kerama, 'Telling Our Stories: Salvation in the African Context', in *Majority World Theology: Christian Doctrine in Global Context*, ed. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 378.

51 See Bryan M. Litfin, 'The Rule of Faith in Augustine', *Pro Ecclesia* 14, no. 1 (2005): 88; Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 109, 146, 196.

52 See Litfin, 'The Rule of Faith in Augustine', 92–95, 97–101; Michael Fiedrowicz, 'Introduction (On Faith and the Creed)', in *On Christian Belief*, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2005), 152–53.

53 Augustine, *On Faith and the Creed* 10.25 (Ramsey, 174).

54 Fiedrowicz, 'Introduction', 153.

55 Fiedrowicz, 'Introduction', 154.

describe the person and work of the Holy Spirit to the extent that the later Nicene Creed did, Augustine appropriated material on the Holy Spirit from the later fourth-century Cappadocian fathers and worked it into his teaching on the creed.[56]

Following Ambrose's model in Milan, Augustine took catechumens through a rigorous discipleship course during Lent. The curriculum was also a line-by-line study of the creed. At their baptism on Easter, new believers 'handed back' the creed, confessing their faith in the gospel that they had received. This approach to discipleship seems very relevant for the global church today, allowing catechists to teach the creed while addressing contemporary cultural questions and even forging new language to describe gospel truths.

In addition to possibly rewording parts of the creeds or unpacking lines from them in culturally meaningful language, should we also vary how we perform the creeds? I hope so. For millennia, Coptic and Ethiopian Christians have chanted their entire liturgies, including the creeds. In their sung masses, Oriental and Russian Orthodox Christians have captured the richness of their cultural worlds by singing the creeds in Middle Eastern and Slavic styles. Since most people in the world are still oral learners (preferring to learn and communicate through oral instead of printed means), chanting the creeds is more meaningful culturally and more effective for spiritual formation in many locations.[57] Meanwhile, Western Christians have been reintroduced to the Apostles' Creed in modern worship through the music of Rich Mullins (1993), Third Day (2003), and Hillsong (2014). In addition to singing the creeds, the Sakha people of Siberia have cultivated a traditional dance alongside the rite of baptism.[58]

Conclusion

The historic creeds provide a faithful summary of the gospel—a statement that unifies the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. The rule of faith and the historic creeds have merely sought to answer our Lord's question, 'Who do you say I am?' The creeds' central concern (who God is and what God has done for mankind) remains relevant for evangelism, discipleship, and church planting and multiplication today. The creeds should continue to be a 'miniature Bible' and syllabus for gospel-centred discipleship. By saying the creeds, we remember the 'living faith of the dead'—what our spiritual forefathers wrestled with in the early centuries of the church. We must guard the good deposit that they guarded in crafting the creeds.

Although the global church is catholic and affirms one gospel, the ways in which we verbalize, describe and communicate this gospel ought to be diverse and reflect our local contexts. The task of global theology today, which looks to the historic

56 This Holy Spirit and trinitarian teaching from the Cappadocians would also shape Augustine's later work *On the Trinity*.

57 See Avery Willis, ed., *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Lausanne Occasional Paper 54), 2004, https://lausanne.org/occasional-paper/making-disciples-oral-learners-lop-54; Tom A. Steffen, *Reconnecting God's Story To Ministry: Cross-Cultural Storytelling at Home and Abroad* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012).

58 See Robin P. Harris, 'The Future of Mission Is Local Worship', in *Mission in Praise, Word, and Deed: Reflections on the Past and Future of Global Mission,* ed. Edward L. Smither and Jessica A. Udall (Littleton, CO: William Carey, 2023), 7.

creeds, should be trinitarian.[59] While the Father, Son and Holy Spirit collaborate in unity to bring praise to the Godhead and salvation to fallen creation, the three persons of the Trinity have unique roles in salvation (i.e., only the Son suffered, died, rose again and ascended; only the Father sent the Son; only the Holy Spirit indwells the believer).

Global theology should also be incarnational. Theologians must work with the building material of their local cultures—their logic, vocabulary, idioms and general worldview. Chinese Christian theology ought to sound different from European theology. Though the incarnational principle inspires local theology, contextual theology still contributes to catholicity.

Finally, global theology should be pneumatological. The Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth, including theological truth. In their discussion of 'Pentecostal plurality'—the tension of gospel unity and local expressions of the gospel—Vanhoozer and Daniel Treier assert that the Holy Spirit makes the church one amid its diverse expressions of the gospel and theology. The historic creeds do not answer every theological question. Rather, they are a starting point for the faith communities within the global church to make sense of Scripture in their times and contexts.[60]

59 See Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church*, 96.

60 Vanhoozer and Treier, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*, 119–23; Vanhoozer, 'One Rule to Rule Them All?' 119; Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church,* 132–34.

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Where Do Ukrainian War Refugees Find Hope and Encouragement?

Andrii Meleshko

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. —Romans 15:4

In a world filled with struggles, pain, suffering, distress, and brokenness, people have always been searching for answers to the question: How is it possible to overcome these miseries of life and maintain the motivation to move forward? This question becomes even more urgent when one faces personal challenges or experiences difficulties in the lives of loved ones. The situation intensifies when personal suffering is compounded by broader tragedies, such as natural disasters or war, which affect not only the individual but entire communities or even nations.

The war between Russia and Ukraine has forced millions of people to flee their homes and has brought immense pain, destruction, and hopelessness to many lives. However, while some lose hope, others manage to find hope and encouragement to move forward and help others.

Hope is a complex concept. For some, it means simply a good wish, while for others it may be placed in a distant future, making it, as D. R. Denton argues, 'virtually equivalent to "eschatology"'.[1] Alternatively, it can carry the meaning of 'practical hope', which involves the expectation of God's promises being realized in the everyday lives of individuals.[2]

Steven C. van den Heuvel has explored various approaches to hope. He identifies the *core* of hope, which shows human desire and speaks of probability; the *structure* of hope, which is considered as a virtue and includes debates on passion and rational expectations involved into it; and the *value* of hope, acknowledging both its positive and negative outcomes.[3]

Incorporating Angelos Chaniotis's research on the role of hope during the Hellenistic and early imperial periods, van den Heuvel highlights how hope and

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1 D. R. Denton, 'The Biblical Basis of Hope', *Themelios* 5, no. 3 (1980): 19.

2 This attitude is often presented in evangelical sermons and daily devotionals. For instance, see 'The Sours of Hope' in *Our Daily Bread*, a widely used devotional booklet: https://odb.org.uk/2005/07/30/source-of-hope.

3 Steven C. van den Heuvel, *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope* (Cham: Springer, 2020), v.

expectations played a significant role in various aspects of human activity, including such diverse areas as sporting competitions, the hiring of guards, the mourning of children, and attitudes towards patrons or the emperor. Additionally, Chaniotis notes that people 'receive hope' particularly within religious contexts.[4]

Van den Heuvel concludes that during the classical period, before the New Testament was written, hope was perceived in both positive and negative aspects. It was not understood merely as an emotion but as an integral part of human life, which 'may be tied politically (and socially) to a benefactor, ultimately the emperor' (who is seen as both a deity and the ultimate power in the Empire). Also, in certain religious contexts hope was seen 'as a "given" from an external force or power'.[5]

Most biblical scholars associate the concept of hope with its eschatological dimension, or with the assurance of salvation. However, van den Heuvel identifies exceptions to this approach in the works of Kadlac and Mies, who explore interpretations of hope in Scripture beyond its eschatological usage. Kadlac introduces the term 'bottom-up' to underscore how individuals experience hope in everyday life. Mies suggests considering a double orientation of hope: temporal and relational. As van den Heuvel explains, 'The temporal axis is the more complex, taking into account hope both as act, movement, or intention and hope as an object or end in view. The relational axis implies faith or confidence in another, hence the expression "to hope in"'.[6]

In another book on the subject, van den Heuvel and Patrick Nullens describe hope as 'an optimism about the future, based on an awareness of discrepancy between current reality and an envisioned ideal'.[7] They distinguish between *wishful hope,* which pertains to aspects of life beyond one's control and involves a passive desire for change, and *aspirational hope,* which actively motivates actions and fosters perseverance.

The most frequent words used in the Old Testament to introduce the concept of hope are *qwh* and *yhl*. Both words carry the meaning of waiting as well. The word *yhl* 'regularly names a specific object or at least implies such an object' of hope[8] and is often connected with the idea of 'looking' (in a waiting) and with the expression 'be still/be silent'.[9] In this usage the 'formulaic expression "wait for Yahweh" refers to God as the source of all good for which one can hope: God alone is the source and reality of what is awaited'.[10] In most cases, *qwh* plays the same role, often mentioning or implying God as the object of hope and speaking about waiting for God and expressing confidence in Him. At the same time, 'In the language of Psalms, however, the verbs *qwh* and *yhl* serve not only the language of confession, assurance and admonition, but also that of lament itself'.[11] Also the word *qwh* etymologically is

4 Van den Heuvel, *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 28.
5 Van den Heuvel, *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 28.
6 Van den Heuvel, *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 28–30.
7 Steven C. van den Heuvel and Patrick Nullens, eds., *Driven by Hope: Economics and Theology in Dialogue* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), xv.
8 G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ginggren, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (*TDOT*), vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 52.
9 *TDOT*, vol. 6, 53.
10 *TDOT*, vol. 6, 54.
11 *TDOT*, vol. 12, 572.

connected with such meanings as 'rope' or 'cord', 'possibly referring to tension of a time of hoping or the rope to which one clings when in need of hope'.[12] Simundson names four categories with respect to which people hope in their dependence on God: the necessities of life, protection from danger, justice and community.[13] Eschatological hope extends beyond these four categories as a source of growing confidence in God.

Hope is essential for survival and progress in human society. A society that loses hope struggles to endure in the face of danger. This is especially evident in cases of social exclusion, such as the experiences of refugees during the early stages of relocation to a foreign country.[14] Furthermore, 'hope plays a crucial role in process of social identification',[15] serving as a significant stabilizing factor in various aspects of life and providing refugees with a sense of continuity and belonging.

In this article, I consider how hope has been understood and perceived by a specific group of refugees—Ukrainians who have fled their country in response to Russia's 2022 invasion—as well as the role the Bible plays as a source of encouragement for them. I also explore which Bible texts these Christians consider most relevant to their situation and how they interpret those texts—whether as hope for future deliverance or for God's intervention in their current circumstances.

I conducted interviews with Ukrainian Christians, asking them to provide specific Bible verses and offer brief comments on their significance. All respondents were laypeople, though some were lay ministers. My focus was on believers' personal interaction with biblical texts in their unique circumstances as refugees fleeing war.

I also asked questions designed to explore participants' relationship with church attendance and consistency in Bible reading, to assess how the stress of the war affected their involvement in the Christian community and religious practices. The ability to maintain religious practices, such as Bible reading and attending church, is an indicator of an individual Christian's capacity to find stability amidst adversity, thereby making the process of restoring life and finding encouragement more accessible.

The history of Bible reading in Ukraine

Bible reading and personal devotion have long been important aspects of the Ukrainian evangelical tradition, even during times when the Bible (as a printed

12 Daniel J. Simundson, 'Hope', in *The Oxford Guide to Ideas and Issues of the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 205.

13 Simundson, 'Hope', 206.

14 Pavel Chalupnicek, 'Empowered to Hope: The Impact of Social Entrepreneurship on Social Exclusion' (in van den Heuvel and Nullens, *Driven by Hope*, 169–84), discusses physical disability as a problem of social exclusion. While the situation with refugees is not exactly the same, it is comparable, especially in the initial period of their stay in a foreign country. The lack of language skills often leaves refugees socially isolated, making them 'deaf and dumb' in a social sense. Additionally, their lack of understanding of how social institutions function leads to confusion and disorientation. While, compared to physical disabilities, these challenges have a good potential to be addressed and resolved more quickly, this is not always the case. For different individuals, it may take anywhere from a few months to a few years to adjust. The most difficult situation arises for refugees with physical disabilities, who face compounded barriers.

15 Van den Heuvel and Nullens, *Driven by Hope*, xxii.

book) was not widely accessible. This importance derives primarily from the historical context surrounding the rise of the evangelical movement in Ukraine.

Several key factors contributed to religious awakening in southern Ukraine, but one of the most significant was the spread of the newly translated Russian New Testament, which was distributed by *knigonoshi* (book carriers)[16] in the mid-19th century.[17] This event played a crucial role in the birth and development of the evangelical movement in Ukraine, fostering a deep, pious reverence for the Bible as the written Word of God. This led to a strong belief in the Bible's practical importance for daily life.

Ukrainian evangelicals' high valuation of the Bible was further enhanced by long periods of persecution, during which owning a Bible was often practically impossible and could be dangerous. Even possessing the Russian Synodal Translation—although it was initiated by the Czar and provided at first by the Russian Bible Society, then completed by the committee of the Most Holy Synod—was at times considered a criminal act. This was because the translation was viewed merely as a supplementary tool for understanding the Scriptures, while the official liturgical text remained in Old Church Slavonic.[18]

16 *Knigonoshi,* literally 'book carriers', were originally itinerant merchants who travelled from place to place selling goods. In the 19th century, they began to sell literature as well, and from that practice their name was derived. Over time, this service was used by various groups to spread ideas among the population, not only through the distribution of literature but also by taking on the role of book-bearers to directly engage with people, as they had official permission to travel across the country. For example, the political movement *Narodniki* used this method to involve ordinary people in social discourse, and evangelicals used it to spread the gospel. The book *History of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in the USSR* (Moscow: All-Union Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, 1989) (in Russian) explains that the effectiveness of this method was so profound that in 1866, the Russian empire established the Society for the Spread of the Holy Scriptures (officially registered in 1869), which immediately organized its own group of *knigonoshi*. One of the most successful workers in this group was Danish missionary O. B. Forhgammer, who served as a *knigonosha* starting in 1863 (p. 46). Another prominent gospel preacher, Assyrian Presbyterian Jakov Delyakov (Jakub Kasha), worked as a *knigonosha* from 1862, collaborating with the British and Foreign Bible Society (p. 38). However, the longest-serving *knigonosha* among Ukrainians and Russians was a certain Scottish Presbyterian missionary surnamed Melville (known locally as Vasiliy Ivanovich), who distributed Scripture from the 1820s through the 1880s (p. 74). Some of the *knigonoshi* from this later period became leaders in the evangelical movement in the Russian Empire.

17 The Russian Synodal Translation was originally initiated by the Russian Bible Society under the patronage of Czar Alexander I. In 1819, the four Gospels were published, and the full New Testament became available in 1822. However, just a few years later, in 1826—one year after the enthronement of the reactionary Czar Nicholas I—the translation of the Old Testament and the publication of the New Testament were halted by a government decree. Work on the translation resumed only after the death of Nicholas. More information on the history of the Russian Synodal Translation can be found in I. A. Chistovich's *History of Bible Translation to Russian Language*, 1899 (in Russian).

18 The Most Holy Synod, in its resolution on resuming the translation, stated, 'The translation into Russian, first of the books of the New Testament, and then gradually of other parts of the Holy Scriptures, is necessary and useful, but not for use in the churches, for which the Slavonic text must remain inviolable, but for the sole purpose of aiding in the understanding of the Holy Scriptures'. Quoted by A. S. Desnitskiy, *Contemporary Bible Translation: Theory and Methodology* (Moscow: Saint Tikhon's Orthodox University of the Humanities Publishing, 2015), 226 (in Russian).

Translations of the Bible into Ukrainian were not allowed in the Russian empire at all.[19] As a result, the translation was carried out in Western Ukraine, which was under Austrian rule, by a volunteer group of Ukrainian writers and linguists. This process spanned the entire second half of the 19th century.[20] Bringing the translation into Russian-controlled Ukrainian territories was problematic, as the Ems Decree issued by Czar Alexander II prohibited the importation of any literature in the Ukrainian language. Despite this, there were attempts to smuggle the translated Bibles, which made them even more valuable to people receiving them.

Within a few decades, even Russian Bibles had to be smuggled into Ukraine, which came under Soviet communist control in 1921–1922. However, smuggling efforts were relatively rare until the 1960s, when this became a common missionary tactic among underground believers in the Soviet Union. Many people resorted to handwriting Christian books and portions of the Bible for personal use and to share with others. Some churches even organized underground printing operations. However, the most widespread solution was the memorization of Bible texts. Some individuals committed entire books of the Bible to memory. This practice of memorizing Bible verses became a key component of Sunday school programs.

This historical situation, where access to the Bible as the Word of God was limited yet it was still regarded as the foundational basis for evangelical churches, fostered a deep understanding of the Bible's value. Moreover, the Bible was not seen merely as spiritual and divine literature offering hope for the afterlife; it was also viewed as a practical guide for everyday life. Its reading, study, and interpretation were closely connected to personal spiritual and moral development, building up the lives of believers, and communal aspects of daily life.

Where hope is found

Sources of hope and encouragement

Some people find or lose their faith in difficult times. Moreover, sources of information and encouragement have changed significantly in recent years. Forty to fifty years ago, Ukrainian Christians might have read a piece of Christian literature in

19 Ukrainian was not recognized as a separate language by the government, but was instead considered a primitive local dialect of Russian. Beginning in the 17th century, there were numerous official prohibitions on the use of the Ukrainian language in literature, culture, and church life. The most well-known of these are Peter I's decree of 1720, Valuev's Circular of 1863, and the Ems Decree of 1876 by Czar Alexander II, along with many lesser-known legislations and instances of persecution for the use of the Ukrainian language.

20 A group of Ukrainian intellectuals, including playwright Panteleimon Kulish, writer Ivan Nechui-Levytsky, and linguist Professor Ivan Puliui, worked on the translation between 1868 and 1903. More information can be found in T. V. Moroz, 'The First Full Translation of the Bible in Ukrainian Language: History of Creation and Publication', *Research Papers of the Petro Mogila's Chernomorsky State University of the Complex of Kiyv Mogyla Academy*, Philology Series 278, no. 266 (2016): 82–87 [in Ukrainian]; T. V. Moroz, 'Little-Known Pages of the History of Translations into Ukrainian of the Books of the Holy Scriptures from the Mid-Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Centuries', *Scientific Bulletin of Chernivtsi University: 'Slavic Philology'* 276–77 (2004): 240–51 (in Ukrainian); J. Nachlik, 'The Bible in the translations of Panteleimon Kulish', in *Roczniki Humanistyczne* (Lublin: Scientific Society CUL, Division of Humanitarian Sciences of John Paul II Lublin Catholic University, 1996), 129–44 (in Ukrainian).

their free time; today, they are more likely to listen to a podcast or watch a sermon from a well-known preacher.

I probed the responses of Ukrainian Christians to the challenges of war by conducting interviews and administering a questionnaire to 43 respondents from January to April 2023. The participants were of varying age, status, education, spiritual experience and geographic location, both original and current. I was not personally acquainted with the respondents, who were volunteers found via various Ukrainian Christian refugee groups through the Telegram message platform.

The questionnaire covered general information about the respondents, details about their church attendance and Bible reading habits, and the main topic of hope and encouragement. All questions were optional, but nearly all respondents chose to answer all the main questions. Most of them (38 respondents) also provided information about their church attendance and Bible reading habits. Two-thirds of the respondents were women, which is understandable given the nature of the migration. The ages of the respondents ranged from 19 to 68.

Respondents generally withheld details about their place of residence in Ukraine before the invasion, although nearly all of them indicated their current location. Most of those who shared their place of residence before the war came from the Kyiv region and from Kharkiv, the second-largest city, in the northeast. There were also respondents from other areas, such as the Donbass region, but people from smaller towns often preferred to conceal this information, as it could reveal their identity. As I have mentioned above, most of the respondents were volunteer participants and had no information about me when I invited them to participate in the survey. Thus, their participation was motivated either by their wish to share their experience in finding hope in the time of war, and/or by recommendation of their minister to participate in it. This context explains discreetness in providing sensitive information. Additionally, individuals from smaller settlements tended to be more reserved about personal information due to the potential risks of exposure. This same concern about potential danger led many people from regions now occupied or experiencing active conflict to withhold details about their original locality. However, it was easier for respondents to state where they were currently residing, as they were asked only to name the country, not the specific town or city. The respondents were dispersed among 14 countries—10 in the European Union, plus the USA, the UK, Switzerland and Russia—with one-third of them in Germany. These data reflect overall migration patterns.

In the main section of the interview, respondents were asked about their sources of encouragement and hope since the beginning of full-scale war. Some respondents preferred to choose from a list of predefined answers (12), while most provided their own responses (31). Many gave what one might call 'good Christian answers' in a way that seemed obvious to them. The greatest number, as expected, spoke of reading Scripture and personal prayer as the means to find hope and encouragement in a time of war. Because of the expected obviousness of the answers, a few follow-up questions were included to explore these responses further.

Twenty-seven respondents mentioned receiving encouragement and hope from family members. While this answer may also seem obvious, it is important to recall that some respondents lost family members in the first days of war, and that some

have only children in their immediate family. For people in these situations, the role of family in providing hope and encouragement takes on a different meaning.

Many respondents (38) also identified contact with other Christians as an important source of encouragement and hope. These contacts took various forms, from attending church services and prayer groups to situations where people sought refuge together in basements or engaged in online calls for spiritual and moral support and prayer. Thus, it can be concluded that communication—whether with friends, family, fellow Christians, or God—was a crucial means of finding encouragement and restoring hope during one of the most difficult times of their lives.

Among other sources of hope, respondents mentioned news of successful operations by the Ukrainian army (12), the opportunity to live as refugees in peaceful areas (8), and the chance to participate in cultural and social activities supporting Ukraine (6). Additionally, several respondents (9) emphasized the significance of meeting people who were willing to help and accept refugees, offering their homes and hearts to those in need. Such acts of acceptance during moments of immense stress and vulnerability became a lifeline for many.

One of the key questions in the survey was: *Did you experience periods of hopelessness and despair during the past year since the beginning of the war? How long were those periods and what helped you to overcome such feelings, if you overcame them?* This question was designed to capture personal feelings and experiences of respondents.

A few respondents (5) confidently stated that they did not experience periods of uncertainty or despair and felt certain about what to do and where to go. These individuals explained that they had anticipated the situation to deteriorate to the point of invasion and had prepared themselves morally, spiritually and practically. This preparation included making arrangements with contacts in the West for relocation or organizing resources at home to survive an invasion.

Some respondents (4) expressed this sentiment less confidently, acknowledging that while they had mentally prepared for the likelihood of war, adopting a mindset that would help them minimize their stress, it was still difficult to fully comprehend that such a devastating event could occur in their time and place.

Among this group, some left the country immediately after the invasion began (6), while others stayed as long as they could, helping civilians and military personnel until they eventually decided to leave for the safety of their families (3). A few respondents (7) noted that they had previously experienced the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, which helped them prepare for what might come. Others (4) referenced Jesus' words in the Gospels, where He advised His disciples not to be discouraged by wars, as such events are part of the end times. Some respondents (2) said they simply took a pragmatic approach to the looming danger and tried to prepare accordingly.

Most respondents (34) acknowledged experiencing periods of stress, uncertainty and despair following the Russian invasion. Most identified several elements that helped them regain stability, clarity and hope, including Scripture (33), prayer (28; these two were often mentioned together but not always), communication with church ministers or other Christians (27), and faith accompanied by inner confidence in God (19). Many (22) admitted that they did not believe—or did not want

to believe—that Putin would actually carry out a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Others described holding onto wishful hope (as defined by van den Heuvel and Nullens) that such an event would not occur.

Among this group of respondents, some anticipated the likelihood of invasion but were not sufficiently prepared to avoid feelings of despair. This is understandable; even when people anticipate negative events, it is natural to respond with strong emotions.

The respondents in this group can be categorized by their sources of encouragement and hope. The largest subgroup (32) primarily found support in spiritual practices, especially prayer and reading or studying the Bible. These people spoke of God's attributes such as his sovereignty, omnipotence, guidance and care. These individuals are diverse with regard to the biblical texts they relied on and how they interpreted those texts. They also varied in their spiritual practices: while some emphasized reading and studying Scripture, others placed greater value on prayer, and a few highlighted fasting as the most vital spiritual discipline during times of trouble.

A closely related subgroup consisted of those who prioritized their personal convictions to sustain themselves during difficult times. Like the previous group, they emphasized the attributes and character of God but focused more on biblical teachings than on specific spiritual practices. For these individuals, maintaining their convictions and beliefs is a way to remain faithful to God, who is always faithful to his people.

The third subgroup included those who drew encouragement from interactions with others, particularly ministers and fellow Christians. These individuals found hope through words of encouragement, reminders of God's faithfulness and power as demonstrated in history, suggestions of Scripture passages to read and songs to sing, and shared prayer sessions.

A small number of respondents (4) mentioned helping others as a source of hope and encouragement. This was a surprise for me, as my personal connections with other Christians and through social media suggested that more than half of my refugee acquaintances found hope and encouragement through their ministry and humanitarian aid work.

Another way to interpret these results is by considering the specific mindset among evangelical Christians in Ukraine (and possibly in other Eastern European countries) regarding the presentation and perception of humanitarian ministry. This mindset, though evolving, traditionally holds that the work of individuals should not be elevated above the work of God. For example, ministers evaluating their humanitarian efforts in a theological context may tend to downplay their contributions. Similarly, recipients of aid from churches with this perspective might also undervalue the role of the human providers. This attitude is often explained via biblical texts such as Luke 17:10, 'When you have done everything you were told to do, you should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty"', and Luke 6:26, where Jesus warns, 'Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets'. These passages are commonly interpreted to mean that ministers should not seek praise or gratitude for their work, as doing so risks veering toward the behaviour of false prophets. Instead, only God should be praised for the work accomplished.

At the same time, when presenting humanitarian efforts on social media, ministers may recognize the practical benefits of highlighting their work. Doing so can help them reach both potential recipients of aid, thereby expanding their ministry, and potential donors, who might contribute to its continuation. From this perspective, ministers may assign greater value to their humanitarian efforts, emphasizing the hope and encouragement such work brings to others. Consequently, the theological and pragmatic approaches to presenting humanitarian ministry can sometimes conflict with one another.

Another inference that can be drawn from these answers is that roughly three-fourths of Ukrainian evangelical Christians engage with Scripture on a regular basis, not merely as a tradition but as a genuine source for addressing life's questions. This estimation aligns with the number of respondents who cited Scripture reading as a source of hope and encouragement in their responses, including those to direct questions about Bible reading habits. This finding suggests that daily Bible reading, while no longer as strong a tradition as it was 30 years ago (in the years shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union), remains an important evangelical value. Among the respondents, about half reported reading the Bible daily, while slightly more than a quarter read it three to four times per week, indicating that Bible reading is still widely regarded as an essential practice for evangelical Christians.

Slightly more than half of the respondents (24) mentioned finding texts that encouraged and gave them hope during their regular Bible reading. Others reported encountering such texts in sermons, through friends, in Christian songs or books, or by recalling verses they had memorized in the past. Some respondents pointed out that not everyone who reads the Bible regularly can find supportive texts on their own. Many relied on others—not exclusively ministers—to suggest encouraging passages, highlighting the importance of Christian communication alongside regular Scripture reading.

The war has created a unique and highly stressful experience, which sometimes inhibits individuals from grasping the meaning of Scripture even when they read it. One respondent openly admitted to having stopped reading the Bible altogether since the war began. This acknowledgement of profound stress and despair reveals a need for spiritual support as well as high-quality spiritual and psychological counselling.

At the same time, many respondents noted the value of listening to sermons or Christian songs, receiving encouragement from lay Christians who suggest uplifting Bible verses, and recalling memorized Scripture. These practices serve as means of bringing hope in stressful circumstances. Additionally, the habit of reading the Bible—even when the mind cannot fully concentrate on its meaning—can bring stability to the lives of refugees struggling to overcome stress and despair in a foreign country. This routine's positive effects can also be supported from a medical perspective, as daily structure and ritual are known to promote mental well-being.[21]

21 See, for instance, Katherine R. Arlinghaus and Craig A. Johnston, 'The Importance of Creating Habits and Routine', *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* 13, no. 2 (2018): 142–44.

Specific Bible texts mentioned

As for specific Bible texts, more than half of the respondents (25) referred exclusively to Old Testament passages, with a particular emphasis on the book of Psalms (17, and 11 of these mentioned Psalms exclusively)—especially Psalm 91, which is traditionally regarded as a prayer for protection and a declaration of God's promise to safeguard his people. This focus is not surprising, as the Psalms vividly express human emotions, hopes and pleas to God, alongside assurances of His response and intervention in times of tragedy. Similarly, some respondents mentioned Ezekiel 34:11–16, as well as passages from the books of Daniel and Esther, which address themes of captivity, dispersion, mortal danger and profound uncertainty—situations that resonate deeply with their own experiences.

Nine respondents highlighted the books of Habakkuk and Isaiah as particularly relevant to their situation and feelings. Habakkuk directly addresses an invasion by enemies from the northeast, which resonated with Ukrainian respondents, allowing them to draw a parallel between the ancient prophetic text and their current circumstances. Similarly, Isaiah describes moments of despair in the face of the enemy. However, both prophets affirm God's presence, sovereignty and power, offering assurance that change is coming. In addition to the broader messages in Isaiah, particular attention was given to passages such as Isaiah 40:31, 41:10, and 54:10, which offer encouragement and promises of God's help and protection.

Other prophetic texts were also mentioned, including Jeremiah 29:11, which speaks specifically about hope, and Jeremiah 33:3, where God promises to hear those who call upon him. One respondent cited Joshua 1:9, where God personally encourages Joshua to be strong and courageous in the face of future battles. Three respondents referenced Proverbs 3:5–6, which emphasizes putting one's trust and hope in the Lord. All these texts were traditionally memorized in Sunday schools, highlighting their long-standing role in nurturing hope among believers.

Six respondents cited texts exclusively from the New Testament, with 12 referencing passages from both testaments (12). Among both groups, the most frequently cited texts were those that speak of God's love and protection. This is understandable, given that the respondents have escaped war and view their survival as a direct sign of God's protection.

For example, one respondent cited Matthew 2:13, where Jesus flees to Egypt, interpreting it as guidance for how they and their family should respond in the face of invasion. Another respondent referred to John 13 to express feelings of betrayal and to reflect on the love of Christ, suggesting how to respond to their emotions. Another person cited Acts 3:19–20, seeing it as a call to restore their relationship with God and to invite others to do the same. A few respondents mentioned needing to trust in Christ and lay their burdens on him, quoting Matthew 11:29. Others spoke of their confidence in God's love (Romans 8) and the strength to overcome trials by focusing on Jesus (Heb 12:1–2; 1 Cor 10:13), while also seeking peace in him (Jn 16:33).

Less frequently cited, but still present in the responses, were texts on the restoration of justice and the punishment of enemies. Respondents mentioned passages from Exodus, Revelation 6:10, and Psalms 9 and 36, among others. Although only about a quarter of respondents referred to these texts, their comments suggest a

prominent desire for God to restore justice in Ukraine and punish the aggressors who have brought war, grief and suffering to the people. Notably, individuals from areas most severely affected by the war, especially from eastern and southern Ukraine (which are predominantly Russian-speaking), referenced these texts more frequently.

A few illustrative cases

To illustrate the comparisons mentioned above, I will share a few brief testimonies from refugees who agreed to share their information anonymously. These examples reflect different approaches to hope among individuals who came from various regions of Ukraine.

Respondent N, a woman in her mid-thirties, relocated to the Czech Republic with her two sons. She was an irregular churchgoer while living in Ukraine but became more consistent in attending church after moving to Europe. N sees the Bible as an important source of encouragement and spiritual strength. However, during the initial days of the invasion, she felt so lost and uncertain that she could not find any stable ground emotionally. She was unable to read anything except for constantly scrolling through news updates about the situation. N said she is still uncertain about the future, as life in a foreign country is inherently unstable, even with support from others and a job to provide for herself and her children. Her main source of hope and encouragement comes from her inner strength and the supportive people around her. Thus, the Bible and the church are primarily tools to strengthen her inner resolve. When discussing future hope, she does not focus on the afterlife but instead hopes for the end of the war and the opportunity for her children to live in a peaceful country.

Respondent L, a young man who lived in Russian-occupied Donetsk until April 2022, shared that he did not experience much stress in the early days of full-scale war. On one hand, he had grown accustomed to the regular sound of cannon fire, even though the intensity varied. On the other hand, he lived on the side from which the attack originated, rather than the side that was being attacked. His main concern was the possibility of being forcefully mobilized into the Russian army. Therefore, as soon as an opportunity arose to leave Donetsk and move to Europe, L seized it.

To find more hope and stability, L spent a significant amount of time reading and reflecting on the issues of divine sovereignty and providence. In addition to his regular Bible reading, he focused on specific texts related to war, justice, peace and reconciliation. He particularly concentrated on Matthew 5, which he considered one of the most personally relevant passages in the context of the ongoing war. His additional reading included works by Timothy Keller, John Locke, Richard Swinburne and others. According to L, reflecting on the temporality of earthly life and God's eternal providence helped him maintain focus on what mattered most and provided encouragement while he was trying to leave Donetsk. The only thing that gives him hope and helps him overcome fear of the ongoing events, L stated, is the resurrection and the promise of eternal life with God.

Respondent O, a middle-aged woman who lived in Irpin (between Kyiv and Bucha) with her two teenage children, left the city in early March 2022 when the fighting intensified. Her car service station, which was near her house, was bombed

by Russian shells. According to her testimony, her primary concern was the safety of her children.

O explained that at the beginning of the war, she did not significantly increase her Bible reading, except during her journey with her children from Irpin to the western border and then on to her current location in Europe. However, she did intensify her prayers, not only as a means of asking God for help but also as a spiritual and psychological discipline. Through prayer, she shared her worries, hopes, anticipations and struggles. In this context, one of the most helpful parts of the Bible for her was the book of Psalms. Despite maintaining hope that the Ukrainian army would eventually protect Kyiv, including Irpin, she often reflected on Psalm 127:1: 'Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain'. For her, prayer became her weapon to protect her city.

O believes that it will take a few years after the war before Ukraine is a safe place to live again. While she hopes to return at some point, she emphasizes that the most important thing is to keep hope in God, for both earthly life and eternal life. O says she saw the providing hand of God during her escape from Irpin. At each stop, whether for a few hours along the way or the few years she has spent in her new home, she encountered people she already knew, most of whom were Christians. Although she did not expect to meet them, she viewed these encounters as signs from God, meant to encourage her. At the same time, O believes that these earthly blessings and the support she received were simply ways for God to strengthen her, reminding her that even without visible support, God would always be near, guiding her toward eternity.

Respondent M, an elderly woman who left her home and business in Zaporizhzhia and moved to Europe to save her life, had never attended an evangelical church in Ukraine. She began attending a Ukrainian-speaking church in Europe solely in search of psychological stability and comfort. Through this experience, she discovered that the Bible speaks to people today, addressing contemporary situations and inner turmoil. According to her, this revelation gave her the hope that even in the worst situations, God can be trusted, as he himself is the hope of the believer. With this hope, she returned to Zaporizhzhia to assist her son, who was serving in the military and had been wounded. While passages about God as judge and provider of justice were central to her, she later came to appreciate the preciousness of texts about mercy and hope for the future life.

Conclusion

Most interpretations of the Bible texts offered by respondents are either simple reflections of their circumstances or applied in a practical, utilitarian way to their current situation. In this sense, Ukrainian Christians tend to view Bible texts as companions on their journey. For most, the Bible is not seen as a supernatural text that performs miracles when read in the right way, but rather as a natural companion that offers guidance, words of support, and hope to help them navigate their lives.

Interestingly, most respondents associated hope more with practical encouragement for everyday life than with eschatological expectations of Christian faith. Their texts and interpretations correspond with the four categories of God's provision proposed by Simundson. Even when referring to the book of Revelation, they primarily

connected their interpretations to overcoming the challenges of their present circumstances.

While the connection between hope and eschatology, as proposed by Denton, may not seem as prominent in the interpretations of these respondents, this aspect of hope is not entirely absent. From the interpretations described above, one can infer that Ukrainian refugees, first and foremost, perceive their experience of hope as something tangible and evident in their lives. When describing this realized hope, they often compare their own experiences to those of biblical characters, particularly from the Old Testament.

Considering the approaches to hope outlined by van den Heuvel, it seems that the most evident approach here aligns with the 'bottom-up' dimension proposed by Kadlac, in which the experience of hope in practical life helps believers form (or hold on to) their aspirations for the future. Additionally, there are elements of the temporal and relational orientations of hope, as proposed by Mies, that encourage people to act in the present while anticipating positive changes in the future. Both of these dimensions of hope are crucial for those who have had to start new lives in unfamiliar places and cultures, not by choice but because of circumstances beyond their control. These dimensions remind believers that God is still present in their lives, even though their circumstances have changed. They are encouraged to maintain their hope and trust in God, who saved them from potential destruction and will help them rebuild their lives.

Future hope for Ukrainian refugees includes desires for the restoration of their homes and a fair trial for the war criminals and politicians who instigated the invasion. These hopes are clearly reflected in Bible texts that speak about justice and the punishment of enemies. Additionally, this hope encompasses the anticipation of future protection from God, as people have already witnessed his protection in their experiences of fleeing areas of active conflict. As the interviews reveal, the closer people were to the immediate situation of war, the more they emphasized texts about restoration—both the restoration of justice and restoration for eternal life.

Thus, although many interpretations emphasize a more practical view of encouragement and hope, this does not mean that Ukrainian evangelicals overlook the eschatological future. Rather, they anticipate that for the eschatological future to come, God's other promises should be fulfilled, laying the 'the foundation of hope'.[22] These promises demonstrate that God keeps his Word, which remains a part of everyday human experience. As Jürgen Moltmann states:

> It is only on the ground of the revelation of God, in the event of promise constituted by the raising of the crucified Christ that faith must seek and search for the universal and immediate revelation of God in all things and for all. The world which proves God's divinity, and the existence which is necessarily exercised by the question of God, are here sketches for the future on the part of Christian hope.[23]

Thus, in seeking the future eschatological kingdom, Ukrainian evangelicals are waiting for the King's intervention in their current situation. Most of the

22 Denton, 'The Biblical Basis of Hope', 22.

23 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 282.

interpretations provided by respondents focus either on God as the protector in moments of immediate threat or on his providence, as manifested in their rescue from danger. By seeing only glimpses of God's work today, people are not only encouraged for their present lives but also gain hope for the future. For them, '*theologia viatorum* [the theology of the pilgrim on the way] will always concern itself with the future *theologia gloriae* in the form of fragmentary sketches',[24] which they recognize in their circumstances today. In these fragments of God's immediate work, they see evidence that he will fully accomplish his promises for the future, as revealed in his Word.

24 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 282.

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God Is Love: In Christ for a World Full of Hate and Conflicting Views of Israel

Steven Paas

This article is a Christian answer to the challenge of the spiral of hate and violence in the Middle East, which has complicated the conversation about 'Israel'. Supporters of conflicting views on the issue are becoming increasingly polarized. How can we identify the source of the problem, and what is the solution? I am convinced that both can be found in the Bible as God's Christ-centred message of love to all peoples. In this article, I continue the dialogue[1] about the position of 'Israel' in personal faith, in theology and in the church.[2] The article concludes that one-sidedly religiously elevating 'Israel' in one's perception of God's plan for the world endangers the spiritual and political welfare of Jews and non-Jews. It leads away from Christ and triggers anti-Semitism.

The starting point

'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16). Here John exceeds the mere mentioning of a characteristic of God. He points to God's being or identity. Eternally and unchangeably, God *is* love. The God who was love in John's time and in today's time is the same God who was described in Genesis as the Creator of the cosmos. We know Him through the 'Son of His love' (Colossians 1:13) and through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was active together with the Son in the entire process of creation. Through the Son, according to Paul's words, 'all things were created which are in heaven and which are on earth, which are visible and which are invisible. … He is before all things, and all things exist through Him' (Colossians 1:15–17; cf. Hebrews 1:2). Creation is, therefore, a work of love that results from God's being, which essentially is in the Son.

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1 See Steven Paas, 'Making Israel Religiously Special is a Controversial Choice', 2 February 2024, https://stevenpaas.chichewadictionary.org/publications/Making_Israel_religiously_special_is_a_controversial_choice_2-2-24.pdf.

2 I began to discuss this set of issues more than 10 years ago in my book *Israëlvisies in beweging: Gevolgen voor Kerk, geloof en theologie* (Kampen: Brevier, 2014), https://brevieruitgeverij.nl/boeken/9789491583353/israelvisies-beweging.html.

God's identity consists of love. This becomes even more apparent when man—who was meant to be the crown of creation (Genesis 1:26–27)—becomes disobedient and revolts against God in sin. Although as a result death and decay enter the cosmos, God's first act is an expression of love. He does not allow mankind to perish in the hands of the devil, but He seeks and calls humanity's representative, Adam: 'Where are you?' (Genesis 3:9). His loving identity is not only the beginning of creation, but also of re-creation. The devil is told that the Seed (*zera*) of the woman will bruise his head (Genesis 3:15). In that promise God presents here His covenant of grace with mankind, which is repeated to Noah (Genesis 9) and especially to Abraham (Genesis 12; 17), and further to Isaac (Genesis 26) and Jacob (Genesis 27). In the universal covenant of grace, God works in His Son, who has become the man Jesus Christ. In Him, God has come close to us humans (Galatians 3:16). God's outstretched arms to Adam in Paradise—and through Adam to humanity of all times and places—embody the essence of love that He is in Christ.

God's identity of love reminds us of Luther's statement, 'God is a glowing oven full of fire and perfect love'.[3] Such a hot oven can warm you pleasantly, but it can also hurt you painfully. God's essence is connected to His attributes. He *is* essentially full of love. He also *gives* love. In that attribute He is merciful and forgiving, but at the same time, in His bestowed love He is holy, righteous and wrathfully intolerant of all evil. He wants to forgive the sinner, but He also judges the sin and the sinner if he or she does not repent. That composite nature of His love was noticed by Noah and his family when they were saved in the ark on the waters of the great flood. The people of that time noticed it too, when they perished in the same flood because of their unbelief (Genesis 7; 8:1–14). That God *is* love did not stop when He executed His judgment. With Noah He renewed the covenant of His grace in a love that applies to all mankind born of Noah: never again will He kill all creatures. The rainbow reminds mankind of God's way of salvation and life (Genesis 8:21–22; 9:8–17).

In His love, God's grace and judgement are connected. That is beyond people's comprehension. But God graciously bows down to assist the weak understanding of mankind, by perfectly conveying what it means to us in His incarnate Son. To make this known, God has revealed Himself in His Word, the Bible, summarized in the good news of salvation through Christ, in Whom He has expressed 'all His fullness' (Colossians 1:19, 20). 'No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known' (John 1:18). Paul reads that statement in God's universal perspective: 'This is the Gospel that … has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven' (Colossians 1:23). 'He sees all mankind' (Psalm 33:13–15). 'All nations are [His] inheritance' (Psalm 82:8). John also emphasizes universality, directly connecting God's loving focus on the fallen world with the mission of Jesus Christ (John 3:16–21; 1 John 4:9–10). The centre of God's message in the Bible is Christ. The addressees are all people. The Bible is the Christ-centred love letter to all people of all times and nations (Isaiah 25:6; Matthew 22:9; 28:18; Titus 2:13; 1 John

3 Martin Luther in an English translation of his sermon on Confession and the Lord's Supper at Lent, 1524–1525, https://lectionarycentral.com/maundy/LutherEpistle.html. Originally: 'Gott ist ein glühender Backofen voller Liebe, der da reichet von der Erde bis an den Himmel', in 'Ein Sermon am Sonnabend oder Samstag vor Reminiscere'. D. M. L., *Weimarer Ausgabe* 10.3, 56, 2–3 (15 March 1522).

2:2). 'God's love is the peace-making movement of God in the world, it is the drive for justice, reconciliation and joy'.[4]

In my opinion, this hermeneutical principle is decisive for understanding the connection between the Old and New Testaments. We read the entire canon of God's revelation in the light of Christ, with the world in view. That starting point means that in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, no other but our triune God is speaking, of Whom the Son of the Father is our Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the Shema ('Hear, O Israel'), of whom it is confessed that 'The Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deuteronomy 6:4), is the same God of whom Paul says, 'There is but one God, the Father from Whom all things came and for Whom we live; and there is but one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through Him we live' (1 Corinthians 8:6).[5] He is unchangeable, 'the same yesterday and today, and forever' (Hebrews 13:8). Other 'gods' are no more than idols. Even though they have old, deep and widely accepted cultural roots, they are imaginations or distorted representations of people.

God's unique choice for Israel

But if in principle God's essence of love expressed in Christ from beginning to end applies to the world of all nations, what does that mean for the people of Israel? After all, God has chosen that people 'out of all nations', as His 'treasured possession' (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6). 'You will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). 'He has done this to no other nation' (Psalm 147:20). He protected Israel 'as the apple of His eye' (Deuteronomy 32:10; Psalm 17:8). God's loving choice for Israel—made to renamed Jacob (Genesis 32:28; 35:10–12) and contained in the Sinai covenant (Genesis 19:5–6)—was indeed unique. But is that uniqueness the *reason* for and the *purpose* of God's plan, and did He thereby make the promise of grace and salvation for Israel alone? (cf. Romans 9:13).

To understand the reason for and the purpose of this particular choice, we must first look at what preceded it. God's election of the people of Israel resulted from and is overarched by His covenant with Abraham. God promised him, 'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Genesis 12:2–3). God repeats that promise several times, to Abraham (Genesis 15:5; 17:4–5; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4) to his son Isaac (Genesis 26:4), and also to his grandson Jacob (Genesis 28:14; 32:28; 35:10–12). Strikingly, this individual election is framed in a universal orientation. God chooses Abraham, then still Abram, with a view to 'all peoples on earth'.

Then, God's covenant with Abraham is overarched by the appearance of the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem, who in a sense represents all the generations or peoples of the earth as 'a priest of God the Most High, Creator of heaven and earth!' (Genesis 14:18–19). Abraham testifies that he is subordinate to Melchizedek by giving him a gift of 'a tenth of everything'. Melchizedek accepts that subordina-

4 Stefan Paas, *De weg van vrede: Recht, verzoening, vreugde* (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2025), chapter 2.

5 See N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), for a solid interpretation of the unchangeable identity of God throughout the Old and New Testaments.

tion by blessing Abraham (Genesis 14:19–20). The conclusion from this passage is that God's covenant with Abraham—and then with Isaac, Jacob, Israel, Moses and David—functions under His universal covenant of grace in Christ. Abraham saw Christ (John 8:56; Hebrews 11:10), and Psalm 110:5 foresees the coming Messiah: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek'. The epistle to the Hebrews confirms this overarching Melchizedek perspective repeatedly (Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1–11, 15, 17, 21). That Priest is of a higher and different order than the Levitical priests and the temple liturgy of Israel (Hebrews 7:1–11). But *why* and *for what purpose* did God in Christ love Israel so passionately?

The *reason* for God's unique love for Israel is as an expression of and encompassed by the motive for which He loved the world (John 3:16). In searching for that reason, we are reminded of the mystery of God's identity. He *is* love and that is why He loved the world and Israel. It was not because of the qualities of the world and of Israel. The world had fallen into sin and Israel had done so too. God's love cannot be rationally explained by the quality of the object. He loves because of who He *is*, for a reason He finds in Himself, 'to make a name' for Himself 'and to perform great and awesome wonders' (1 Chronicles 17:21). We cannot penetrate deeper into the mystery of God's identity. There is a big difference between God's love and our love. Our love is not perfect. We love because we like the beauty and attractiveness of something or someone. Because of His identity of perfect love, God loves the very thing that sin has made ugly and unattractive. When the Spirit pours out God's love in our hearts, we receive some of the fragrance of this love (cf. Romans 5:5). God loved Israel because He *is* love. 'Because the Lord loved you, and kept the oath He swore to your forefathers' (Deuteronomy 7:8). God's oath or promise to 'your forefathers' points back to the universal orientation of the covenant of grace that we discussed above. In His love for Israel, God demonstrated His love for all nations.

What was God's *purpose* in His unique love and choice for Israel? What was His plan in doing so? What was His loving identity focused on? For whom or what did God want to achieve something with it? If you are inclined to separate the history of Israel—*mutatis mutandis* the Jewish people—and the Law and the Prophets from the Christ-centred universal focus of God's message, you can easily be enticed to seek God's purpose in a lasting exceptional position and future of Israel or the Jewish people themselves. But on that road of thought we get stuck. Then we lose sight of the fact that God has an overarching purpose for the world and of how He has used biblical Israel or the Jewish people for this. The history of Israel is a story of God's works of grace and judgement. In His Old Testament dealings with Israel as a people and as a nation, God shows for the whole world of all nations—and also to us in the end times—who He is for them and what He wants them to do.[6] In other words, Old Testament Israel was not God's focus but it was the missionary instrument to reveal and convey His message of salvation to the world, with Christ as the ultimate climax. In an instrumental sense, salvation 'is '*from* the Jews' (John 4:22), but salvation is not *through* the Jews. God Himself remains the Director. Through the Law, He pointed out for Israel and the world the gravity of sin and the impossibility of protecting oneself from judgement through self-assertion or self-salvation. Through the Pro-

6 N. T. Wright, 'Does Modern Israel Play a Role in End Times?' (podcast, 2024), https://youtu.be/EtdVmRaA2s8?si=l99UknivMs7Dh4x3.

phets, He foretold that Israel and the world may expect a Saviour, Jesus Christ. Old Testament Israel was chosen to demonstrate that message.[7]

Fulfilment

In Christ, God has culminated the instrumental, demonstrative, metaphorical function of Old Testament Israel, through which its essential meaning has been perfectly revealed and realized or fulfilled. Before the incarnation of Christ—that is, before His suffering, death, resurrection and ascension—God's intention remained shadowy or shrouded in mystery for mankind. But with the coming of Jesus as the Saviour of the world (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14) or the Light of the world (John 8:12), the curtains have been pulled back for the nations, including the Jewish remnant of Israel, even torn (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38), and the dividing wall between Jew and non-Jew has been destroyed (Ephesians 2:14; cf. Romans 2:11). Christ has, as it were, taken over the function of Old Testament Israel in God's universal plan of salvation, and has brought it to completion and essential significance.

Does this mean that God has rejected Israel, or the Jewish people, from His plan of salvation? That is a serious misconception, which is sharply corrected by Paul: 'Not at all! As in all nations, until the second coming, there is a significant 'remnant' in Israel, who have surrendered to Him in faith in accepting God's gracious offer in Christ (Romans 11:1–5). By fulfilling Israel as a temporary instrument in Christ, God has confirmed and shown the content of the mystery-box of His worldwide plan of salvation, which was still in shadows at the beginning (Ephesians 3:36; Colossians 1:26–27; cf. Romans 11:25). Now, it can be clear to the whole world that He gathers His one unique people from all nations—including the Jewish people and all the possibly untraceable segments of the twelve tribes scattered around the world—as the Church of Christ,[8] the 'Israel of God' (Galatians 6:16).[9] That people is 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; 21:3; 22:3–5; cf. Exodus 19:6).

Israelism

What does it mean for modern Israel that God is love and that He centres His message of love in Christ, and that He addresses it to all nations equally (Romans 2:11; 10:12; Galatians 3:28)?

First, there is much misunderstanding about the meaning of the term 'Israel'. Which Israel is meant? Physical Old Testament Israel has not existed for more than 2,500 years. It no longer exists as a state, a nation, or a discernible ethnic entity. In

7 A. Blake White, *God's Chosen People: Promised to Israel, Fulfilled in the Church* (Colorado Springs: Cross to Crown Ministries, 2017); Steven Paas, 'Chosen in Christ to Salvation and to Participation in His Work', 14 February 2023, https://linkedin.com/pulse/chosen-christ-salvation-participation-his-work-steven-paas/.

8 Joost van Meggelen, 'In Christus is de Kerk het ware Israël', 2024, https://linkedin.com/pulse/hhk-predikant-van-meggelen-christus-de-kerk-het-ware-israël-paas-5qche/.

9 Ernst Leeftink: 'Het Israël van God (Gal.6:16), dat zijn alle mensen die horen bij Jezus', 7 October 2024, https://linkedin.com/pulse/ngk-predikant-leeftink-het-israël-van-god-zijn-alle-mensen-paas-f7h7e/.

1948, the current Jewish state used the old name by calling itself 'Israel'. However, this does not make the Jewish people outside and inside that state identical with the Israel of the twelve tribes under kings Saul, David and Solomon. Jews consider themselves to be primarily descendants of the tribe of Judah, who returned to the land after the exile, together with incidental members of other tribes including the priestly tribe of Levi. Paul was a Benjaminite (Philippians 3:5), and the prophetess Anna was of the tribe of Asher (Luke 3:36). There are groups of people in all parts of the world who—rightly or wrongly—claim to be descended from ancient Israel. Sometimes they are recognized as such and then are allowed to undertake the 'aliyah', or 'return to Zion', just like Jews anywhere in the world. One example is the 'Beta Jews' or 'Falasha' from Ethiopia.

Jews and many Christians consider these facts as indications of what they expect to be the restoration of ancient Israel in accordance with a literal understanding of prophecies such as Ezekiel 36–37. This view or belief is an aspect of the phenomenon among Christians that I have referred to as 'Israelism'.[10] The term is related to the name 'Christian Zionism'[11] but does not coincide with it. It is the complex theory of an extraordinary religious position and future for the ethnic 'Israel' or the Jewish people—as a state, nationalistically, theologically and spiritually. These expectations of a restoration are focused on the moment of the return of Jesus Christ, for some on the situation after the event (premillennialists, dispensationalists) and for others on the time before it (often tending towards postmillennialism). They look forward to a massive or popular conversion of the Jews, who will then reach out to convert unbelieving humanity as preachers of the Gospel and (in the expectation of the post-chiliasts) bring the Church to unprecedented growth. In all variants, it is said that modern ethnic Israel, or the Jewish people, in Christ has remained the exceptional and unique 'people of God'. Implicitly and often explicitly, they say that God has two unique peoples of His own, the one usually without the acknowledgement of Christ and the other with Christ. Remarkably, the intrinsic contradiction of this view is usually not recognized or considered as a weakness or objection.

It is also believed that the Church of Christ is 'unbreakably' and 'unrelinquishably' related to Israel. That sounds obvious if one were to mean the God-obedient minority of Old Testament Israel. But this view also recognizes an exceptional religious connection and kinship of the Church with the 'Israel' that—whether or not motivated by the Jewish religion or Judaism—rejects Jesus. In the context of this view, the undeniable importance of 'love for Israel' and the 'Jewishness' of Jesus are in danger of derailing into exalted idolatry, which contradicts the biblical meaning of Israel and of Jesus.

As argued above, the continuous line in God's revelation opposes those views. They do not correspond to God's purpose for the world and to the meaning of 'Israel' as confirmed and completed in its fulfilment by Christ. In His identity of *being* love, God does not have any racial or nationalistic preferences in His plan of salvation.

10 Steven Paas, ed., *Israelism and the Place of Christ: Christocentric Interpretation of Biblical Prophecy* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2018).

11 Rob Dalrymple, *These Brothers of Mine: A Biblical Theology of Land and Family and a Response to Christian Zionism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015); Steven Paas, *Christian Zionism Examined: A Review of Ideas on Israel, the Church, and the Kingdom,* 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020).

For the Gospel, all nations are equal, circumcised or uncircumcised (Romans 2:11, 28, 29; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:6; 6:15).[12] The sentiment of priority for one (often one's own) people and country that we hear again a lot today—whether it stems from modern Israel or from the radical right-wing trend in the West—results from a non-Christian ideology, which conflicts with the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12).[13] Chronologically, missionary history applies, 'first for the Jew, then for the Gentile' (Romans 1:16; 2:9–11; 3:29, 30). But Paul pointed out to his Jewish brothers at the Jerusalem council that Gentiles also led the way in the belief in Jesus, both chronologically and in terms of content: 'We believe that it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved *just as they are*' (Acts 15:11). In addition to the theological objection to prioritizing or idolizing Israel, thus cherishing excessive love for Israel—sometimes called philo-Semitism—there is a danger that it will evoke the opposite or that it can turn into hatred of Jews or anti-Semitism under the pressure of changing circumstances.[14]

Replacement?

In accordance with the classical Christian faith, I believe that the Bible is God's Christ-centred message of love to all the peoples of the world—unfolded through the Old Testament revelation from Genesis onwards—in their equality for receiving the Gospel from God in the mission of Jesus Christ.

Christians who adhere to the 'Israelism' discussed above usually—in different degrees—reject the consequence of this hermeneutical starting point. Emotions often play a dominant role in this. They say that historical Christianity has been guilty of replacing Israel with the Church. In doing so, the Church appropriated all the blessings of God intended for Israel, whereas the Church unilaterally burdened the Jewish people with God's curses, especially those for the murder of Jesus. This so-called 'replacement theology', especially in Europe, went hand in hand with a centuries-long tradition of persecution of the Jews, culminating in the Shoah (also called the Holocaust) in the time of Nazism.

Unfortunately, much in this sad description cannot be denied. It is a consequence of a pseudo-Christianity mixed with hatred of Jews, which has often darkened the bright light of the Gospel, particularly in Europe. However, as for the classical Christian faith, which we defend here, this accusation by the Israelists does not hold water. In our approach, the importance of the Jewish people or 'Israel' is in no way replaced or reduced. How could or should the Church, as the spiritual body of Christ, replace an ethnic people? Instead of replacing or 'rejecting' the Jewish people (cf. Romans 11:1), they are allowed to cooperate with other nations in strengthening God's message of love. By 'making full' or by 'fulfilling' the meaning

12 Steven Paas, *Liefde voor Israël nader bekeken: Voor het Evangelie zijn alle volken gelijk* (Kampen: Brevier, 2015), 115–98.

13 Steven Paas, 'In Jezus Christus lijdt elke religieuze Israëlverheffing schipbreuk', 28 December 2023, https://linkedin.com/pulse/jezus-christus-lijdt-elke-religieuze-israëlverheffing-steven-paas-sdwce/.

14 Steven Paas, 'The Idolization of Israel Is Harmful to Jews and to Christians', *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal* 7, no. 2 (2023): 53–66, https://1b8aae.n3cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2023-72a-SEI-Journal-Summer.pdf.

of the Jewish people (cf. Romans 11:12), Christ has made the Law and the Prophets come true in a 'full' reality that is wider and higher than Old Testament Israel could ever have accomplished: for all peoples of all times and places (cf. Romans 11:25).

Love against hate

Supporters of Israelism often suggest that all those who have different views of Israel from theirs are infected by replacement thinking. They usually connect this reproach to the even more far-reaching accusation of (disguised) anti-Semitism or hatred of Jews or of (unconsciously) favouring this. That (often very vocal) allegation makes Christians afraid to speak out against Israelism. After all, who wants to be seen as condoning the long history of persecution of the Jews in the European world?

On one hand, this accusation should have been completely unfounded. For if God is love and if the Bible radiates God's love in Christ to all people, how then can Christians be haters of the Jews? Yet, on the other hand, unfortunately, this has turned out to be possible in the history of European Christianity. Many Christians have cherished such a hatred because they wrongly viewed all Jews as the descendants of the Christ-killers. For others, the harsh Jewish rejection of Jesus played a role. Tragically, the great church reformer Martin Luther, who held 'God *is* love' so highly, was an example of this. Initially, unlike the medieval church of Rome, he was sympathetic to the Jews. He thought it was important for the Reformation of the church and the understanding of the Bible that Christians would immerse themselves in the Hebrew language and culture. Moreover, he expected that Jews would flock to the church, now that he had purged it of abuses and idolatry. However, that turned out to be a disappointment. Instead of converting to the Christian faith, Jewish leaders ridiculed Luther and his work. It was unbearable to him that they also mocked Jesus. In Jewish expressions, Jesus was deemed not worthy of the name Messiah. Rather, he was named a deceiver, for there was still nothing to be seen of the foretold messianic kingdom of peace.[15] Luther became embittered and his initially positive feelings for the Jews disappeared. Sadly, towards the end of his life he published very hurtful anti-Jewish writings, which have been eagerly used by Jewish persecutors to justify their anti-Semitic violence.

A weak spot in Luther was that he gave up love in the confrontation with critically minded or hostile Jews.[16] I think that also today the greatest challenge for committed Christians is to obey the commandment of love of Jesus, even towards one's enemies. Which of us would pass that test of faith? In the case of his relationship with the Jews, Luther failed the test. It was not because of his lack of appreciation for the Jewishness of Jesus and for the Jewish heritage that he recognized as part of the Bible's context.[17] Also, Luther was right when he rejected the Jewish religion or Judaism. After all, it denies Jesus as Messiah and as Son of

15 The Jewish theologian Amy-Jill Levine mentions this as the main reason for the Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah and of His divinity. See her book *Jesus for Everyone: Not Just Christians* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2024).

16 Steven Paas, *Luther on Jews and Judaism: A Review of His 'Judenschriften'* (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2017); Paas, *Liefde voor Israël nader bekeken*, 31–114.

17 Martin Luther, 'Dass Jesus Christus ein geborener Jode sei', *Weimarer Ausgabe*, S. 314–336; 'That Jesus Christ was born a Jew', *Luther's Works*, 199–229.

God. Luther and other Christians throughout the ages rightly believe that Messiah Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, is the final expression of the only God, whose identity is love. That is the core of the Christian faith. Even today, many distort or reject this belief, certainly not only the Jews of Judaism. Paul calls them 'enemies of the cross of Christ' (Philippians 3:18). Their enmity to the Church can be refined, crude and violent. How do we deal with them? The touchstone is love. As Jesus said, 'Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for great is your reward in heaven. … But I tell you who hear Me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you' (Luke 6:22–28).

In His self-sacrificing love, the suffering and dying Christ is our Saviour and our Example. He sacrificed Himself unto death, that we might live. That urges us to be grateful. Love, therefore, is the first aspect of the fruit of the Spirit that characterizes grateful Christians (Galatians 5:22).

Let me conclude with a few questions. In the light of Jesus' words, is self-sacrificing love also the hallmark of Israelism, which one-sidedly elevates the Jewish people to an extraordinary religious position? Does unbridled love for Israel represent the message of love that God offers to the world in Christ? Or does it resonate more of the human primordial desire for self-preservation in a slavish expectation for and from an earthly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:25–26; cf. Psalm 122:6; Luke 19:42), which threatens peace with God and in the world, for Jew and non-Jew alike? The answer to these questions concerns the friction point between conflicting views of Israel and is, in my opinion, decisive for personal faith, theology and the church.

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Remembering Byang Kato: A Personal Reflection

Wouter van Veelen

On 19 December 1975, Byang Kato, a young African evangelical theological leader, tragically drowned off the Mombasa coast of Kenya while on vacation with his family.[1] Almost three years earlier, Kato had been appointed as general secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar (AEAM, now known as the Association of Evangelicals in Africa or AEA). During those three years, Kato had traveled extensively, passionately speaking, teaching and preaching across the continent, and rallying evangelicals worldwide for the cause of biblical Christianity in Africa. In 1974, Kato was one of the plenary speakers at the first International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland. Just months before his death, Kato published *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, in which he critically discussed the works of contemporary African theologians.

Byang Henry Kato was born in 1936 into a family who were adherents of the traditional religion of the Hahm (or Jaba) people in Kwoi, Kaduna State, northern Nigeria. A few months after his birth, he was dedicated to become a juju priest. In a biographical article, Kato recalls that seven children after him died because of malnutrition—a sign that Kato, the first son, enjoyed the protection of the ancestral spirits.[2] However, shortly after going through the initiation ceremonies of the Jaba people, he heard the Christian gospel from Mary Haas of the Sudan Interior Mission. Kato converted and was baptized at the age of 12. At age 19, he enrolled at Igbaja Bible College (now Igbaja Theological Seminary). After continuing his studies at London Bible College and Dallas Theological Seminary, he earned his doctorate in 1974. With his experience as general secretary of the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA, now known as Evangelical Church Winning All) along with his academic training, Kato was well positioned to lead the recently founded AEA. He was

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1 Speculation about the cause of death varied. The people of his hometown believed that Kato's death was not an accident and that he had been attacked by an enemy. His widow, Jummai, managed to convince the family that Kato died through the will of God. See Aiah Dorkuh Foday-Khabenje, *Byang Kato: The Life and Legacy of Africa's Pioneer Evangelical Theologian* (Carlisle: Langham, 2023), 81–85.

2 Byang Kato, 'The Devil's Baby', *Africa Now* (January–March 1962): 10–11.

unanimously elected general secretary at AEA's second general assembly at Limuru, Kenya, in 1973, becoming the first African to hold this post.[3]

Because of his untimely death, Kato led the AEA for only a short period. Yet his vision of a Christianity that is simultaneously truly biblical and truly African would determine the course of African evangelicalism for decades to come. He is widely regarded as the father of African evangelical theology. What can we learn from Kato's legacy 50 years after his tragic demise? In this article, I offer some personal reflections on the relevance of Katonian thought for Christian leaders worldwide.

Africa's pioneer evangelical theologian

Just before being appointed as AEA general secretary, Kato warned in a lecture against what he called 'theological anemia in Africa'. Kato claimed that the spiritual battle for Africa would be largely fought 'on theological grounds'.[4] Despite the explosive numerical growth of Christianity on the African continent in the preceding decades, Kato argued, it was questionable whether Christianity had a future in Africa, because the African church was deficient in sound theology. In his view, contemporary African Christianity was threatened by multiple liberal tendencies and could survive only if a strong biblical foundation was laid. He called on African evangelical leaders to take up this theological task, especially by prioritizing theological education and training.[5] Tite Tiénou, who attended the gathering as a young pastor, considered Kato's passionate call 'a turning point' in theological awareness among evangelicals in Africa: 'As I recall, Kato did not have to do any convincing. The leaders knew that the lack of theology was one of the chief problems of African Christianity'.[6]

Kato systematically expounded his ideas in *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (1975), in which he fiercely attacked both the contemporary inculturation movement, represented by theologians like John Mbiti (1931–2019) and Bolaji Idowu (1913–1995), and the ecumenical movement in Africa, embodied by the All Africa Conference of Churches. Both post-colonial movements sought to decolonize the Christian faith and make it relevant to Africa, either through the study of African traditional religions (inculturation movement) or by prioritizing contemporary socio-political issues (ecumenical movement). Kato fully supported the quest for a relevant theology for Africa, but he feared that Africa's theological leaders were so

3 The AEA was founded by two American missionary organizations in 1966. One of its goals was to 'alert Christians to trends and spiritual dangers which would undermine the Scriptural foundation of the Gospel testimony'. See further Christina Breman, *The Association of Evangelicals in Africa: Its History, Organization, Members, Projects, External Relations, and Message* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996).

4 Byang Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa: A Collection of Papers and Addressees* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1985), 11.

5 As part of carrying out his theological vision for Africa, Kato initiated the establishment of now well-known institutions such as the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (now known as the Association for Christian Theological Education in Africa), Bangui Evangelical School of Theology, and Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (now known as Africa International University).

6 Tite Tiénou, 'The Theological Task of the Church in Africa: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Be Going?' *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 6, no. 1 (1987): 3.

preoccupied with African issues that the universal core message of Christianity—eternal salvation through Jesus Christ alone—would be jeopardized. While he endorsed the need to contextualize the gospel message in the African context—Kato was one of the first to use the then-contested term 'contextualization' at Lausanne in 1974—his concern was that due to the priorities of inculturation and liberation, the biblical foundation of Christian theology would be abandoned. Contextual theology is a necessity, but it should not be detrimental to the content of the gospel, Kato argued. Therefore, his book's purpose was 'to alert Christians to these pertinent dangers'.[7]

More precisely, Kato warned against the pitfalls of syncretism and universalism. His problem with the theologians of his day was not that they sought a contextual theology, but that they theologized on the wrong foundations. Mbiti, for instance, described the coming of Christ as the fulfilment of African traditional religions, thereby placing Africa's pre-Christian past on par with the Old Testament. Idowu, too, with his concept of 'implicit monotheism', suggested that Africans basically worshipped the same God before the arrival of Christianity. For Kato, these positive interpretations of African traditional religions were unacceptable. According to him, the 'religions themselves are not the witness of God's revelation, but they prove the yearning for God in the human heart'.[8] The original religions were therefore at best a distortion of general revelation, but they could never lead to a saving knowledge of Christ. By theologically valuing Africa's pre-Christian past, Mbiti, Idowu and others were effectively relativizing the unique revelatory character of Scripture, which could only lead to a form of syncretism. The very essence of the Christian faith as God's lifesaving message was at stake.

Despite his sometimes fierce criticism of the theologians of his day, Kato's purpose in writing *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* was primarily 'to make a positive contribution to the discussion'.[9] Towards the end of the book, he outlined his vision to preserve biblical Christianity in Africa. Without a firm grounding in Scripture, he contended, African Christianity would quickly relapse into a form of neo-paganism—a concern he expressed in many other lectures and articles.[10] The urgent need was not so much a process of Africanization, but of Christianization. Hence his famous statement, 'Let *African* Christians be *Christian* Africans!'[11] After all, an appropriate contextualization can be achieved only when the core of the gospel—Jesus Christ crucified and risen for our justification—is not compromised.

How original is Kato?

Kato has been criticized for the lack of originality of his ideas. Indeed, his theological position largely aligns with the well-known Bebbington quadrilateral that defines evangelicalism in terms of biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism. Given the universally evangelical outlook of his position, Kato's critics, such as

7 Byang Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 16.
8 Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 135.
9 Kato, *Theological Pitfalls*, 16.
10 See for instance Byang Kato, *African Cultural Revolution and the Christian Faith* (Jos: Challenge Publication, 2010); Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa*.
11 Kato, *African Cultural Revolution*, 38.

Kwame Bediako, John Mbiti, Mercy Oduyoye and Victor Ezigbo, have dismissed his ideas as mere copies of Western Christianity, more particularly its North American brand, and thus irrelevant to the African context.[12] These authors suggested that Kato, by categorically emphasizing the Bible as the sole foundation of theology and endorsing evangelical convictions, did not allow for a creative interaction between Christian faith and African realities. John Parratt aptly summarizes these criticisms (which he shares) by saying that Kato 'seems to have uncritically swallowed the opinions of his North American mentors'.[13]

However, we must bear in mind that Kato was at the beginning of his career; he was only 39 when he died. Paul Bowers emphasizes that at the time of publishing *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, Kato was still developing, personally, spiritually and theologically. By the time he died, Kato was already revising his book. Whether and how his ideas would have developed must remain an open question. As Bowers states, '*Pitfalls* is to be taken not as a final word but as a first word, a promise of what might have come had Kato been spared'.[14] Keith Ferdinando also stresses that Kato left an unfinished legacy. Certainly it was not Kato's intention to uncritically embrace North American evangelicalism. His goal as an African evangelical leader was to fully engage in the contextualization debate while remaining faithful to the worldwide evangelical tradition. According to Ferdinando, what makes Kato's legacy of abiding value is not so much its theological originality but its prophetic vision. As a modern African Tertullian, he set the agenda for evangelicalism in Africa.[15]

The relevance of Katonian theology

When he was appointed as AEA's first African leader, several major crises were occurring. On a global scale, the Cold War was raging. The African continent was ravaged by civil wars, military coups and famines. In South Africa, the struggle against the apartheid regime was growing. In some African countries, such as Chad and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Christians were persecuted. His own country was still recovering from the horrors of the Biafra War (1967–1970). Kato consistently analyzed the many crises on the African continent through a theological lens. In his view, the primary task of Christian leaders is to search for the root cause of a problem. He was convinced that theological issues underlay these contemporary challenges. In his own words, 'Exploitation, disease, abject poverty, and deprivation of the basic necessities of life have been the lot of the majority of

12 See Victor I. Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies: Conversing with the Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus in Contemporary African Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010); Kwame Bediako, 'Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century', *Themelios* 20, no. 1 (1994): 14–19; John Mbiti, 'The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology', *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 4, no. 3 (1980): 119–24; Mercy Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986).

13 John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 62–63.

14 Paul Bowers, 'Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy', *Trinity Journal* 1 (1980): 85.

15 Keith Ferdinando, 'The Legacy of Byang Kato', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 4 (2004): 169–74.

African people. But what is the root cause of these human tragedies?'[16] His response was simple: sin.

The brilliance of Kato is that he connected Africa's urgent contemporary issues to the gospel's ultimate questions. The biblical witness speaks about being lost and being found, being dead and finding new life again, walking in darkness and living in the light. What Africa needs first and foremost, according to Kato, is to know Jesus Christ as the Way, Truth and Life. Kato emphatically stressed that this does not mean a form of escapism into the spiritual realm so as to forget present-day struggles. Instead, acceptance of Christ as Lord is the first, decisive step towards the holistic transformation of Africans.

Kato's main criticism of the theologians of his day was that they addressed Africa's struggles only superficially and overlooked the main problem: alienation from God. Because he worked consistently within a theological framework, Kato continues to challenge Christian leaders around the world to read their times theologically. What is *really* going on? What are the root causes of the war in Ukraine, the disintegration of Western societies, the worldwide arms race, the spread of fake news, climate change? And how can we relate these troubling situations to the life-saving and life-changing message of the gospel?

Closely related to this point, Kato's works stand as a warning against the reality of syncretism. Although Western countries are rapidly secularizing, the residual Christian influence on Western history and culture can blind Christians in the West to the presence of syncretism. Kato, as a first-generation Christian, experienced African traditional religions from within. Unlike Mbiti, who was raised in a Christian family and approached African traditional religions rather positively, Kato understood the dark and demonic sides of the religion of his ancestors: 'As a child I used to be very afraid of a graveyard. I am still not sure that I would be happy to spend a night in a cemetery. I think this fear comes from my pagan background, because I grew up believing that the spirits of the dead come back to haunt the living'.[17] Christians should not be naive in this area, according to Kato. Reading and meditating on Kato's works can help Christians in other parts of the world to detect their blind spots. Throughout his works, he warned against the danger of blending of worldviews, leading to a watered-down Christianity. As A. Scott Moreau has shown, some degree of syncretism can hardly be avoided.[18] However, Kato shows that Christian leaders must do their utmost to remain faithful to the Bible and Christian tradition so that the distinctiveness of the core message of personal and eternal salvation through Jesus Christ alone is preserved at all times.

Some time ago, our church hosted a pastor from Bénin, West Africa. During his sermon, he told us that African Christians like to dance when they sing. 'This is because we have a pagan background. We are so happy to know Christ', he said. The global church needs people like Kato and this Beninese pastor to help us see the gos-

16 Kato, *Biblical Christianity in Africa*, 15.

17 Byang Kato, *The Spirits: What the Bible Teaches No. 5* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1975), 3.

18 A. Scott Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012).

pel from a fresh perspective, as truly a new story that cannot be blended with anything else.

Kato: a voice to be heard

Kato was certainly not without shortcomings. In his debates especially with Mbiti and Idowu, he was sometimes fierce and uncompromising, leaving little room for careful weighing of arguments. Also, his approach to contextualization lacks the nuances and subtleties characteristic of discussions following the Lausanne 1974 conference. This all makes him a child of his time. Nevertheless, Kato deserves our theological attention and appreciation as a prophetic voice who, in troubled and turbulent times, stood for the truth of the gospel.

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Book Reviews

A Short History of Christianity beyond the West: Asia, Africa, and Latin America, 1450–2000
Klaus Koschorke

Pb., xxv + 374 pp., bibliography, index

Reviewed by Francis Jr. S. Samdao, Senior Lecturer of Historical and Systematic Theology at the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary and assistant editor of the Evangelical Review of Theology

With Christianity growing rapidly in the Majority World, to properly understand world Christianity and church history, it is essential to have more textbooks providing insightful information about what God is doing beyond the West.

Koschorke argues that Christian communities in Africa and Asia existed long before European colonists came to these continents. He then challenges the perspective that Christianity's global expansion was primarily a result of earlier European missionary activities. While he credits Western missionaries' contributions, he asserts that Christianity grew because of other factors, such as 'local multipliers and Indigenous Christian initiatives of different scope' (xxi).

The first of the book's six parts discusses Christian churches in Europe, North Africa and beyond as well as the rise of Islam. Koschorke explains the expansion of Portuguese and Spanish (Iberian) influence in the 15th and 16th centuries, as a backdrop for understanding the colonization of Iberian power in Africa, the discovery of the 'New World' by Columbus, and encounters with St. Thomas Christians in India. 'Despite the violent nature of the conquista', he writes, 'there were also many forms of peaceful contact and intercultural exchange between Spaniards and indigenous people early on. Religious discussions were also among them' (28). Some of these encounters happened in Mexico and Nicaragua. This part also covers the inception of Catholicism in Asia, closely associated with Francisco de Jassu y Janvier (Francis Xavier), who understood the importance of adaptation to the cultural contexts rather than quick mass baptisms.

Part 2 focuses on the 17th and 18th centuries. By the late 1500s, the Iberians controlled most international trade. However, at the end of the 16th century, other European powers, including Protestants, became involved in trade and also sought spices (Asia), sugar (Brazil and the Caribbean), and slaves (Africa). Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands were also players in colonization. The Netherlands colonized many regions previously controlled by the Portuguese.

The story of Christianity in other places, particularly Asia, varied according to political, socio-cultural and colonial contexts. For example, Christianity in Japan and China declined, while Western missionary expansion continued in other parts of Asia, such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Part 3 (1800–1890) discusses the conclusion of the first Iberian colonial period and the beginning of the Protestant missionary movement in the nineteenth century. Protestant missionaries ventured into many regions that had previously been inac-

cessible during Iberian colonization. Their missionary efforts included evangelization and modernization. They established chapels, orphanages, hospitals and schools. Protestant missionaries engaged with the public sphere by challenging practices like widow burning in India, participating in medical and educational fields, and introducing the printing press and Bible translations, among other initiatives.

Part 4 focuses on Christianization from 1890 to 1945. Protestantism's growing missionary zeal accelerated colonialism in Africa and Asia (181), but this period also saw experiments with indigenization in Asia, independent churches established in Africa, and denominational pluralization and the growth of Pentecostal churches in Latin America.

After World War II, almost all Western colonial areas in the Majority World were dissolved. However, churches started by the Western missionaries continued and even experienced explosive growth. Decolonization and indigenization advanced. In 1948, in Sri Lanka, the first native priest in the Anglican tradition was ordained. Inculturation, contextualization and liberation theology became prominent terms as Christians from the Majority World endeavoured to apply their cultural heritage to understanding the gospel.

The book's last part concentrates on the 21st century and the challenges for world Christianity, such as the crisis of liberation theologies, digital globalization, liberalized travel and new polycentric dynamics. Koschorke discusses the rich and new characteristics of the multiple forms of Christianity now seen in the Majority and Minority Worlds.

This work is a valuable contribution to the global history of Christianity. It is a good partner to Philip Jenkins's *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died*. Koschorke provides a very organized bibliography, which is essential for a work in history. His inclusion of maps and photos is helpful, because writing history should not be confined to written text. The comprehensive preface helps readers navigate the book.

Beyond just providing a basic history of Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America, Koschorke also presents insightful analysis and ideas beneficial for history or mission courses. I highly recommend this book for seminary students and Christians interested in Majority World issues.

In the Midst of Much Doing: Cultivating a Missional Spirituality

Charles R. Ringma

Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2023
Pb., 535 pp., index

Reviewed by Paul T. Criss, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religion Baptist Health Sciences University, Memphis, Tennessee, USA

How can ministries and ministry leaders sustain a healthy missional spirituality in a chaotic and busy world? That is what Charles Ringma sets out to address. He has served in urban and cross-cultural missions, teaching in colleges, seminaries and

universities in Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia, Europe and Canada for over three decades. He is an emeritus professor at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada; an honorary research fellow of Trinity College Queensland in Brisbane, Australia; a Franciscan tertiary; a companion of the Northumbria Community in Brisbane; and the founder of Teen Challenge in Australia.

Ringma uses a well-organized, articulate, and didactic writing style to present an authentic integration of mission and spirituality by exploring 'how our outer life can *deepen* our inner life' (p. 3). He presents an invitation to engage with Christian spiritualities and listen deeply to discover what may be gleaned from these various perspectives and incorporated to improve a ministry's spiritual and missional health. Ringma interjects personal experiences, which offer engaging insights regarding implementation and results of moving toward a missional spirituality.

The author begins by unpacking what is meant by mission, spirituality and missional spirituality. He expands this understanding by exploring prayer, service, contemplation and action as found in the writings of Evelyn Underhill, Mother Teresa, Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, Segundo Galilea and David Augsberger. The third chapter presents theological themes essential to missional spirituality, including its cruciform, trinitarian, paschal, community and hospitality-based foundations. The fourth and fifth chapters elaborate on the synergism between contemplation and action, as well as mysticism and ministry.

The second part of the book emphasizes biblical themes. Drawing from both the Old and New Testaments, Ringma explores major themes of biblical spirituality on both personal and communal levels, showing how all of life should be a spiritual practice. In chapter 7, he explains the heart and scope of integral mission as the comprehensive love of God shaping how faith communities shape and orient their mission to the world. Here, Ringma demonstrates the integral nature of missional biblical themes. The following chapter utilizes the typology of head, heart and hand to highlight the importance of orthodoxy, orthopraxy and orthopraxis in developing a missional spirituality that incorporates theology, spirituality and missional strategies to encourage both action and reflection while allowing for evaluation and change. Chapter 9 discusses the biblical perspective on the poor and the importance of the church sharing God's concern for the poor by serving and identifying with them.

The third part focuses on historical traditions in the Christian church, encouraging the contemporary church to re-engage with these traditions to better engage our times. Two chapters discuss Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, respectively, and their engagement in biblical, theological, spiritual and missional themes. Ringma then explores what he calls the 'radical evangelical movement' and the danger of placing activism over self-care and spiritual practices. Chapter 13 investigates the missional spirituality and marginal perspectives of the Anabaptist movement. Next, Ringma considers Franciscan spirituality, specifically its orientation toward the poor, engagement with issues of social justice, concern for creation care and passion for peacemaking. Finally, Ringma examines how liberation theology and spirituality address the healing and restoration of the poor.

The fourth and last part identifies themes that need greater attention in developing a missional spirituality. The three chapters in this part discuss asceticism,

which should mark the Christian life through sacrifice in practice; the theme of suffering and the importance of suffering with others as God, through Christ, has suffered for us; and the spirituality of hope, which orients any ministry towards the future.

When picking up Ringma's text, a reader might expect to find a guide to a particular type of missional spirituality or a formula for attaining one. However, he instead presents how an integrated missional spirituality might appear through summaries of historical, ecclesiastical and traditional forms of spirituality and how they might be applied to mission. Some may view the use of inclusive language as a hurdle, but Ringma seems committed to making his work accessible to the widest audience possible. Overall, this is not only an informative text but also a formative and transformative one for ministries and those who lead them. It is a valuable read, well worth one's time.

Asian Christian Ethics: Evangelical Perspectives
Aldrin M. Peñamora and Bernard K. Wong (eds.)

Cumbria, UK: Langham, 2022
Pb., xvii + 355 pp.

Reviewed by Tianji Ma, Institute for Evangelical Missiology, Giessen, Germany

This book offers a thought-provoking, regionally focused contribution to discussions of Christian ethics. Both editors have a combination of academic expertise and theological insights to this project; Peñamora is a prominent figure in the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches and Wong is a professor and pastor from Hong Kong.

The book examines both personal and social ethics, aiming to promote a nuanced understanding of Christian moral life rooted in Asian cultures while firmly adhering to the gospel. It presents a unique and valuable viewpoint on how Christian ethics can be contextualized within a "we-self" collective ethos instead of an individualistic "I-self" framework (4).

The book's first part, on personal ethics, addresses themes such as marriage, filial obligations and the challenges of faithful living in a complex marketplace. Wong's essay critiques traditional Asian familism by contrasting it with a biblical vision of familial relationships that resist oppressive hierarchies. Similarly, ShinHyung Seong's exploration of filial obligations juxtaposes Confucian ideals with biblical principles, advocating a reformation of filial piety that reflects love for God and neighbour. In the business ethics domain, Jean Lee warns against compartmentalizing morality, urging Christians to embody integrity and hope even in the unpredictable marketplace. Hwa Yung's incisive analysis of corruption introduces a biblically grounded and culturally sensitive approach, challenging dualistic thinking and shallow understandings of biblical material.

The second part expands into social ethics, engaging broader societal issues such as ecological stewardship, wealth inequality and caste discrimination. Athena Gorospe's essay on creation care intertwines biblical narratives with ecological crises in Asia, emphasizing a theology of life that integrates the environment into a broader

ethical framework. Vinoth Ramachandra's critique of economic inequality draws on both biblical teachings and early church fathers to highlight the moral responsibility of rejecting exploitative consumerism. His work resonates profoundly in a region marked by stark socio-economic disparities. Nigel Ajay Kumar's discussion of caste dynamics provides a critical evangelical perspective, addressing the enduring impact of colonialism and Christian complicity in reinforcing caste discrimination. Kumar's theological response is rooted in the Pauline vision of unity in Christ, offering a pathway for reimagining inclusive ecclesial practices.

The final chapters consider the intersection of mission, peacemaking and public theology. Rula Khoury Mansour's analysis of just peace incorporates case studies from Palestine and Indonesia, presenting the church's role in embodying God's shalom amidst conflict. Paulus S. Widjaja extends this discussion to interfaith contexts, advocating for a peace ethic grounded in Christ's love and justice. Widjaja's call for transformative engagement offers a compelling vision of how the Asian church can serve as an alternative community in a pluralistic and often divisive landscape.

While the book excels in its contextual and interdisciplinary approach, it does have limitations. The exclusion of some current topics such as refugee crises, a pressing issue in Asia, represents a missed opportunity to address contemporary ethical challenges more comprehensively. Moreover, while the essays are rich in theological and cultural insights, some readers might consider the absence of a concluding chapter summarizing the implications for global ethics a notable omission. A deeper engagement with Western ethical traditions, such as those of Augustine or Aquinas, could have further enriched the dialogue between Asian and Western perspectives.

Nevertheless, this book makes significant contributions to Christian ethics. By emphasizing the interrelation of personal, social and cosmic dimensions, it exemplifies a holistic ethical vision that transcends parochial boundaries. Its insistence on grounding ethics in the gospel's transformative power challenges readers to rethink their moral frameworks in light of cultural particularities and global interconnectedness. The integration of local wisdom with Christocentric virtues demonstrates how Asian Christian ethics can offer fresh insights into moral formation, justice and reconciliation.

This volume is particularly suited for theologians, pastors and seminary students seeking to deepen their understanding of ethics in Asia. It will also benefit Western scholars and practitioners interested in learning from non-Western approaches to theology and morality. The book's engaging and accessible style ensures that it reaches a broad audience, fostering dialogue across cultural and theological divides. Ultimately, it invites readers to witness how the gospel transforms lives and communities, affirming its relevance for diverse contexts and challenges.