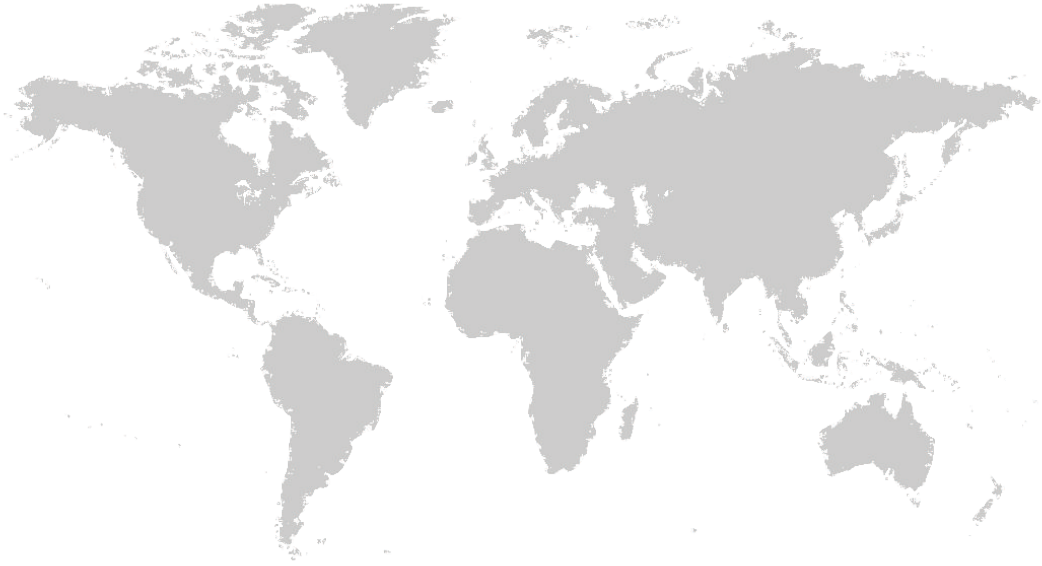
The World Evangelical Alliance's Journal
of Theology and Contemporary Application

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY



WEA
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Volume 49 • No. 2 • December 2025

Evangelical Review of Theology

A Global Forum

Volume 49 • Number 2 • December 2025

Published by

WEA
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

WIPF *and* STOCK *Publishers*
199 West 8th Avenue • Eugene OR 97401
wipfandstock.com

All issues of ERT (now published in English and Spanish!)
are available on our website:
https://theology.worldea.org/evangelical-review-of-theology/
To order hard copies, contact orders@wipfandstock.com

ISSN: 0144-8153
ISBN: 979-8-3852-6978-5
Volume 49 • No. 2 • December 2025

Global Theology Department

Editorial Policy
The articles in the *Evangelical Review of Theology (ERT)* reflect the opinions
of the authors and reviewers and do not necessarily represent those
of the Editors, the Publisher, or the World Evangelical Alliance.

The Editors welcome both unsolicited submissions and
recommendations of original or previously published articles
or book reviews for inclusion in ERT. Manuscripts, reviews,
queries and other communications may be addressed
to the Executive Editor at jhwang@worldea.org.

Printed by Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 West 8th Avenue, Eugene, OR 97401
wipfandstock.com

Table of Contents

A Note from the Editor 100

Church Governance: Learning from Scripture and Secular Practices 101
Richard Cardew

The Missing Cup: Covenant Fulfilment and Eucharistic Transformation in the Passover Tradition 115
Jonathan K. Corrado

A Philosopher's Reflections on Faith Deconstruction: A Review Essay on Two Recent Books 129
Elmer John Thiessen

An Evangelical Theology of Technology Stewardship 141
Aristo Purboadji

One Thing Necessary 151
Richard L. Smith

Missiological Exploration of Old Testament Foundation for the Great Commission 160
Victor Umaru

Christ Is the Owner of Haaretz 175
Yohanna Katanacho

Book Reviews 191

A Note from the Editor

Warm greetings from *Evangelical Review of Theology*. This is the second and final issue of the year, and I have enjoyed the process of stepping into the role of Executive Editor that Dr. Bruce Barron performed splendidly for seven years. He continues to serve as a copy editor for *ERT*, so I am grateful that his many contributions remain a part of the journal.

ERT has sought to be a steady, learned, and trustworthy presence for evangelical Christians to be theologically informed and culturally engaged. As with past issues, issue 49.2 brings together voices around the world to point the way toward Christian obedience in our polarized world. My aim is that Christians of every stripe will consider carefully the potpourri of what they share, especially where our views on contested issues might diverge.

Within these pages, Richard Cardew explores various models of leadership, paying special attention to how the intersection of scriptural and secular models can inform our practices within the modern world. Jonathan Corrado examines the significance of wine's absence in the original Passover account of Exodus, showing that this gap in the ritual is an imaginative act that anticipates the new covenant. Elmer Thiessen reflects on the philosophical trend of deconstruction, especially since some Christians find such an approach to be more honest and biblical than traditional views.

Aristo Purboadji offers the outlines of an evangelical theology of technology stewardship, an urgent topic in an era of both accelerating cultural change and increasing ambivalence among Christians on the use of technology. Victor Umaru gives an overview of the Old Testament foundations for the Great Commission, correcting the common misunderstanding that mission is a theme that is confined to the New Testament.

Finally, ERT is reprinting an important article by Yohanna Katanacho, an Israeli Palestinian Christian theologian, previously published as 'Christ Is the Owner of Haaretz', *Christian Scholars Review* 34 (Summer 2005): 425–41. He writes as an evangelical scholar of the Old Testament who highlights oft-neglected features of the OT's theology of land. In the process, he also shows us how a beleaguered Christian community in the Middle East strives to be faithful both to their own history as a people and their witness to the Muslim majority around them.

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) 49:2, 101–114

Church Governance: Learning from Scripture and Secular Practices

Richard Cardew

Introduction

When church government is mentioned, we in the Western world may think of three models or structures: hierarchical, presbyterian, and congregational. Whilst these forms remain significant and are represented outside the Western world, their dominance has been eroded in the West by many other variants, ranging from independent megachurches to localized communities gathering for worship and fellowship. Often, congregations have emerged with dominant individuals in either influence or formal authority, whilst some small churches operated quite informally. Essentially the spectrum ranges from autocratic leadership through hierarchical structures to participatory democracy. At the same time, certain roles have become sharply defined in some contexts, notably elders and deacons and the roles available to women. How do these systems compare with guidance from Scripture, and are there things we can learn from good governance practice in the secular world?

This paper was prompted by my experience in church governance as a congregational member, office bearer in denominational churches and then an independent megachurch, executive positions in a theological education consortium, and similar positions in major universities, as well as in professional associations and a motor sport club. In a number of these positions, the issue of governance was addressed in detail, in some instances in company with experts.

Scripture has much to say, both directly and indirectly, about church governance but contains few mandates about either structure or functional roles. This paper reviews the trajectory of church governance since New Testament times, describing the influence of tradition on current practice. I then compare that information with the nature of governance in modern Western society, arguing that some recent trends in the latter realm are better aligned with some biblical principles and can offer useful guidance for church polity. Essentially, I argue in favour of systems that involve shared leadership and strong member participation, whilst recognizing that the size, age and context of a worshipping community are legitimate factors influencing practice.

One caveat: my perspective is that of one oriented to the Western world. I am aware that conclusions expressed here may not be directly transferable to these other contexts. Although Western worldviews can trace their origins back to the Graeco-

Richard Cardew (MA, University of Sydney) has worked for diamond merchants, in road and air transport, and in urban planning, as well as holding academic posts at the University of Sydney, Macquarie University, University of New South Wales, and the Australian College of Theology (now Australian University of Theology). These included executive roles in academic program development and governance. Email: rvccterr@gmail.com.

Roman world and have been profoundly influenced by Christian thought,[1] Middle Eastern worldviews were the context for most of Scripture,[2] a factor that needs to be appreciated when interpreting Scripture.

The early Christian church and the emergence of hierarchy

The church described in the New Testament was, in a sense, an emerging church[3] as it moved from its Judaist heritage to a Gentile social and political context. Though it was initially headquartered in Jerusalem, its mission extended to the ends of the earth. The book of Acts charts the church's formative years and explains the imperative for this mission in terms of the fulfilment of covenant promises and the specific command of Jesus (Acts 1:8). Nevertheless, New Testament governance practice was influenced by Judaist practice, even in Gentile territory, as some churches developed within the shadow of the synagogue and matters of principle were influenced by the church in Jerusalem. Robinson[4] observes that after the dispersion following Stephen's impact, 'the Hellenistic element in the Jerusalem church seemed to disappear and its Judaic character prevail.' Moreover, Paul the apostle continued to give initial priority to Jewish audiences in his missionary endeavours, and he also respected the authority of the Jerusalem church, as evidenced by several visits there for endorsement of his work. Hence, the time period recorded in Acts, which covers only a few decades, was hardly enough time for enduring structures to form. In other words, 'the first century was an age of transition' for the church.[5]

By the second century, an organized church with a hierarchical structure had emerged among a Christian diaspora scattered around the Mediterranean and further afield—for instance, in Ethiopia and perhaps Albania, Romania, Crimea, Persia and India.[6] It did not embrace all churches, but it was ultimately divorced from Judaism and the Davidic lineage. Ignatius is widely quoted to demonstrate that a hierarchy had developed and perhaps also how far it had progressed. Clear distinctions had emerged between bishops and others.[7] Toon claims that hierarchy made it easier to form councils, define the canon and resolve heresies with statements of faith that stood the test of time.

---

1 A. Wilson, *Remaking the World: How 1776 Created the Post-Christian West* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

2 K. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), introduction.

3 R. S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

4 D. W. B. Robinson, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. J. D. Douglas et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 285.

5 P. Patterson, 'Single-Elder Congregationalism', in *Who Runs the Church*, ed. P. E. Engle and S. B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 148. The church at Ephesus is an exception as it begins with those who received John's baptism as mentioned in Acts 19.

6 P. Johnstone, *The Church Is Bigger Than You Think: The Unfinished Work of World Evangelisation* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 65; S. Jayakuma, 'Mission in Its Long-Term Perspective', in *A Different Perspective: Asian and African Leaders' Views on Mission*, ed. S. M. Brooking (Artarmon, Australia: OCA Books, 2006), 97–128.

7 P. Toon, 'Episcopalianism', in *Who Runs the Church*, 25.

Had the early forms of New Testament church structure remained in place, would an agreed-upon set of authoritative writings have emerged—i.e. the New Testament canon as we know it today—or would the Patristic writings carry the same weight in theological argument? The collaboration that led to people able to speak for large groups of churches such as the Councils, which has been used to defend the episcopal (hierarchical) model of governance,[8] was not prescribed in Scripture.

Hierarchy was challenged during the Reformation period not only by Congregationalists and Presbyterians but also by radical reformers who placed considerable emphasis on the priesthood of all believers.[9] The European church scene was complex as political elements and movements and theological differences influenced structure and allegiance and even the amount of attention later generations would devote to different views—for instance, the relative neglect of the radical tradition's history. War between Protestant groups was at times protracted and destabilizing. Was hierarchy intended, an emergent problem, or an inevitable result of the institutionalization of the church over time? It was probably inevitable though not universally.

Lessons from the Old Testament

The Old Testament is used in some ways to derive principles of church governance, notably by examples of leadership and God's use of key figures in his dealings with his people. There are further messages, though. After the Exodus, the people were a loose federation of tribes. A secure future required a more organized state, and the people, perhaps realizing this, asked for a king 'like other nations'. God is recorded as granting their wish, even to some physical characteristics; Saul stood head and shoulders above most of the people. But he was not to be entirely like the sovereigns of other nations. Instead, he was to be subject to God, who spoke partly via prophets (or a judge if Samuel's status had changed during Saul's reign). Consider the time when Saul acted before Samuel arrived to guide him (1 Samuel 15).[10] Even David, the 'king after God's heart', was similarly subject to the rebuke and authority of a prophet, Nathan (2 Samuel 11). None of this diminished the responsibility to exercise leadership, but it shows that sovereignty was less than absolute, with the secondary benefit of restraining the abuse of power (the problem that lay at the core of David's sin against Uriah).[11]

The Old Testament records the role of judges and gives an example of delegation of responsibility by Moses. But other sources are needed to understand the extent to which decision-making was shared by multiple persons whether formally appointed or not.

8 Toon, 'Episcopalianism', 25.

9 R. W. Heinze, *Reform and Conflict*, *From the Medieval World to the Wars of Religion, AD 1350–1648*, Monarch History of the Church, vol. 4 (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2005), 167.

10 J. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 118.

11 See chapter 2 of Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, for an interesting take on Bathsheba in the genealogy that appears in chapter 1 of Matthew's gospel.

New Testament imagery used to describe the church

How do these views sit with the biblical imagery used for the church and its members? First Peter 2:5 describes members as living stones, and from Hebrews 7:23–28 the concept of members as priests is inferred since each has access to God through Christ. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 uses the metaphor of the body and the temple to show how all believers have parts to play in church life. Moreover, as A. D. Clarke observed, Paul avoided the readily available words for leader that carried strong authoritative connotations.[12] The true head is Christ, and the members enjoy an equality of standing with each other that was probably liberating in ways that modern, suburban, middle-class Westerners cannot fully appreciate. This perspective may be a corrective to an overly authoritarian interpretation. Similarly, Jesus' teaching in the Gospels emphasizes the servant role of those who lead, as exemplified in his relationships with both his disciples and people who were disdained by sections of the righteous, such as tax collectors.

In writing to the churches, the NT authors were influenced by the existence of problems. Most of Paul's letters deal with issues of false teaching and behaviour, and the rich vein of theology he provides is often directed towards the problems as much as providing teaching per se. We might note that most letters do not ask the elders to fix the problems but appeal to the churches to do so, suggesting perhaps that the whole congregation should be aware of or involved in addressing the problem. At that time, congregations may have been small, meeting in houses.

The rise of hierarchy

How, then, did the modern structures develop? According to Zekhov,[13] the hierarchical element evolved under the influence of the church fathers as they fought to preserve the unity of the universal church amidst growing persecution and heresies, developed their thinking on liturgy and the sacraments, and saw the benefits of single-person leadership.

Earle Ellis[14] hints at another possible factor helping to formalize organisational structure: the requirement under Roman law for organizations to be government-registered as collegiums and to have a designated representative. The obligation to register associations with government to ensure legal status is a modern equivalent. Also, Graeme Chatfield, previously Associate Dean at Australian University of Theology, mentioned in personal communication with me that those drawn into leadership influenced the governance structure. Consequently, as the upper socio-economic strata became more common in leadership, so their hierarchical perspective was brought to bear.

---

12 A. D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Leadership* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2007).

13 Y. K. Zekhov, 'The Rise of Hierarchical Leadership (Historical and Theological Survey of the Formation and Development of the Hierarchical Leadership in the New Testament and Early Church)' (master's thesis, Evangelical Theological Seminary, Osijek, Croatia).

14 E. E. Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), 140; E. Judge, 'Synagogue and Church in the Roman Empire', *Reformed Theological Review* 68 (2009): 29–45.

This line of argument does not imply that hierarchy was absent in NT times. Clarke[15] has made a case for incipient hierarchy based on logical and pragmatic arrangements within and between household churches. The owner of the place of meeting or patron may well have been the leader, provided that the criteria enunciated in Scripture were generally satisfied, and in places where multiple house churches existed, such as Corinth,[16] a council of elders may have been established, comprising heads of house churches. Yet all heads of house churches were not necessarily elders, nor were all elders necessarily heads of house churches. This view depends somewhat on the places for gathering being small and limiting congregational size below about 40; Ellis measured places in remnant buildings equivalent to those that might have been used and believed that their capacity might have been greater, although this might depend on assumptions about their how they were seated. Barnett suggests that mid-first-century Corinth might have had five house churches with a combined congregation of about 250.

Unity in Christ and shared responsibility

What principles might guide us? We are one in Christ, as his church, and we share equally. The priesthood and equality of believers affirm this. The church is a body, with no member less important in status or function than others, in the sense that all functions are important. Oversight, leadership, pastoring and teaching are among the gifts to the church (Eph 4:7–16; Rom 12:6–8) and are exercises in service, not power (Mt 20:25–28; Jn 13:1–20). Love, respect and mutual submission are characteristics of relationships among the believers (Mt 18:19; 23:8; Acts 15:28). Order is important; disorder is unhelpful or even damaging to the congregation and its witness. Decision-making is usually collective rather than vested in one person or necessarily hierarchical.[17] We are to be people who individually and collectively bring honour to the name of God and especially avoid causing shame or slander (1 Pet 2:11–12; 3:15–16).

That unity in Christ is a privilege and responsibility. The responsibility is towards God from persons, and from person to person, to live in a way that leaves no room for ridicule or slander and involves a capacity to defend their life and actions as if in a court of law (1 Pet 3:15). That requires being informed. Does such responsibility imply shared understanding of purpose, or what today we might mean by ownership of purpose (or decisions)? The readers are not asked to appoint leaders and follow them, but they are instructed individually and corporately. The letter is addressed to all. In other words, the readers should appreciate the ways in which were selected and appointed.

We find the same tendency in most of Paul's letters to the churches, as well as those of James and John. There is little evidence that they focus upon elders in addressing the problems the churches face, or on asking the congregations to listen to their elders. On the contrary, they generally speak to all individuals within the church.

15 Clarke, *A Pauline Theology*.

16 P. Barnett, *The Corinthian Question* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2011), 80–81, 225–27.

17 Matthew 18:19, 23:8, Acts 15:28.

Leadership and authority were dominant values in that society, and particularly in the core unit of the household or *paterfamilias*. The household was both a social and a business unit. It was subject to a single head. Echoes of this relationship are evident in the household codes in the epistles, but there the equality of the gospel brings a change that may have stung the ears of some heads of households at the time, because it asked them to relinquish some of their power and status to love and serve their wives, family and servants.[18]

The notion of equality is expressed in other ways. Lincoln[19] argues that the divisions between slave and master, husbands and wives, women and men were abolished in Christ but persisted in practice, guided by household codes that were consistent with the acceptable mores of Greco-Roman society. However, they were recast to place Christian values of mutual submission, equality and love at the core of the codes and therefore markedly shift the emphasis that may have been evident in the relationships within the *paterfamilias* of the time (and since). For the society of the time, they were transforming ideas, a powerful counter to the abuse of power within households.

Yet despite the authority vested in the head of the household of the time, Elmer[20] suggests that society was collectivist and contrasted sharply with the individualism of modern Western society. Decisions were not made in isolation from the extended family. Also, some conversion occurred by household rather than by selected persons within the household.

Equality and the concept of ownership

How might we capture the implications for societies today that value equality, as opposed to earlier communities characterized by authoritarian structures? Perhaps the concept of ownership might be helpful. We could illustrate this by asking who owns the church. Our Lord and Saviour does, of course. But are the members employees, customers or part-owners with those who exercise the roles of elder, pastor or teacher? We are family, but we may find the metaphor hard to apply in a company of hundreds or thousands of people, or cross-culturally, or with any meaningful strength because of the incidence of family fragmentation or dysfunction in Western society.

If we are customers, the leadership is obliged to serve us and meet our needs to secure our continued adherence. If we are employees, we are to submit and receive direction; if part-owners, then we share responsibility for the purpose and outcome. The first two categories can be followers and leave the burden of responsibility to others, but part-owners have an obligation or self-interest to share responsibility. That does not remove the justification for hierarchy or formal assigning of responsibility to persons with particular skills or characteristics, but it implies that each member should be engaged in decisions of significant consequence that an organization might be required to make.

18 C. Keener, 'Commentary on Ephesians 5', *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 2063–66.

19 A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians,* Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 359–60.

20 D. Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections (*Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), chap. 15.

How might ownership be reflected in governance? A clue comes from the proportion of the congregation required to support a direction a church might take. As Schaller[21] points out, the smaller the church, the higher the proportion required for such action. Conversely, a very large church may need only a small minority support for an action, whether formally or informally. This could be interpreted as reflecting a weak sense of ownership and a rather uncritical willingness to be led, though not necessarily to be involved, as Hartford Research evidence suggests a high level of involvement and satisfaction in large churches.[22] In addition, it might be a function of large churches' focus on the mainstream demographic, where order and clarity of direction reduce uncertainty and therefore provide more comfort for attendees.

There is another name for part-owners, of course, that immediately raises the sceptre of capitalism, and that is shareholder. In public companies, the relationship between those who exercise leadership and questions of accountability have been extended by case law and, recently, by legislation and behavioural codes in the UK and Australia. In particular, the agency model (which involves a separation between the roles of board chair and CEO) has been adopted more frequently in corporate practice in the United Kingdom and Australia (indeed, it is required for banks) than in the USA, where one person still commonly serves as both CEO and chairperson. The US option may generate marginally higher profits.[23] However, in the wake of the global financial crisis, the US federal government considered legislation that favoured the agency model, and it was supported by that doyen of minimal regulation, Alan Greenspan,[24] a neo-conservative and self-confessed objectivist whose trust in market forces was punctured by that crisis.

The main implications of this analogy are as follows:

- Owners or members should be engaged rather than just feeling involved, which implies a proactive interest in policy and direction and capacity to contribute by viewpoint, vote or informed moral support. It implies a voice.
- Ultimate responsibility rests with a board rather than an individual—that is, a multi-elder model rather than a single-elder model.

Civil frameworks for governance of organizations

In Australia, if the church or any organization does not have a separate act of Parliament[25] authorizing it to exist as a legal entity and enter into financial transactions, it must be an incorporated association or a company limited by guarantee. Of these

21 L. E. Schaller, *The Very Large Church: New Rules for Leaders* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 154, 169–70.

22 S. Thumma and D. Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

23 L. Donaldson and J. H. Davis, 'Stewardship Theory or Agency Theory: CEO Governance and Shareholder Returns', *Australian Journal of Management* 16 (1991): 49–63.

24 A. Greenspan, *The Age of Turbulence* (Camberwell, Australia: Penguin Group, 2007), 208. Objectivism is identified with the philosophy of Ayn Rand.

25 Some mainline denominations in Australia were established as legal entities by government legislation or government charter. Two organizations on whose boards I served transferred to a company limited by guarantee, one from a denomination covered by an act of Parliament, the other from an incorporated association.

two, the latter is a not-for-profit version of a corporation that would be listed on a stock exchange; the former is the usual legal structure for small organizations.

These legislative provisions assume elements of governance and church structure that may sit uneasily with the expectations of church founders and pastors, and especially with independent churches experiencing vigorous growth. Indeed, a single-elder model of governance does not comply with Australian corporation law or statutes relating to incorporated associations; rather, the responsibility is vested in a legally responsible group, usually described as a board or committee.

An incorporated association is common, especially for small organizations. A private company could be very uncomfortable for members of the congregation and the public, casting doubt on who is the real financial beneficiary of the church. A company limited by guarantee can act like a public company and comes under the same legislative provisions, though even the use of the term 'company' may raise concerns. A public company, as distinct from a company limited by guarantee, is unlikely because it trades on the stock exchange, and that would bring its own complications (would one company of congregations buy out another?). A trust would be possible but may constrain any business activity and would also require surpluses to be distributed to beneficiaries annually or on an otherwise specified timetable. Trust structures in countries other than Australia might be more flexible.

In a private company, the interests of employees and customers are protected by separate sets of legislation. Only a few people, or perhaps only one, shoulders the business risk. In a public company or association, however, all owners or members take the risk, up to the value of their participation. Legislation and codes protect them and the public generally, addressing such matters as checks and balances, restraints on power, transparency of decision-making, openness to scrutiny, and accountability.

It follows from this analogy that if church members are in some sense owners, they share the responsibility for decision-making, and that those who make the decisions are accountable to the congregation and are obliged to move within the scope of what the congregation agrees with. How does that fit with megachurches, which, as Schaller observes, can make strategic decisions with the explicit support of only a small minority of the congregation?[26] When a dominant or charismatic leader of a large church is in the best position to introduce false teaching or shift the church's direction by degrees, with numerous followers hesitant to question, governance becomes a serious issue. If a large majority and a protracted process are required to evict the pastor, there is little a small group might be able to do except to resign in protest.

Limiting the abuse of power

The constraints on power and exercise of authority are clear in Scripture. In Matthew 18, the disciples are rebuked for considering their position in heaven, let alone the present—even though, after only a select few experienced the Transfiguration, their questioning is understandable. Similarly, the imagery of the model shepherd who knows and cares about his flock recurs as an example of servant leadership

26 Schaller, *The Very Large Church*, 161–63.

and signifies the perfect shepherd example of Christ (Mt 20:24–28). Humility should be a prominent characteristic of a Christian, as Paul sets out in Philippians by way of exhortation and example. King David also showed humility, both in the Psalms and as recorded in the narratives of his reign, especially Chronicles. Neither Paul nor David, though, exhibited the mildness of speech or manner popularly associated with humility; their humility was an honesty about oneself that acts intentionally and sacrificially according to the principles of Scripture.[27]

Those who belong to the congregation are partners in the work of the church, exercising their gifts. There is an imperative for maturing as a Christian, gaining wisdom and exercising discernment, not just for themselves but to know God and his purposes. That truth seems to have implications for the level of participation in the purpose or mission of the body of Christ or in an individual congregation. Rather than simply being followers, enjoying the things they like about a church and giving of themselves in return in the ways they prefer, believers should be committed sacrificially to the body of Christ and fully engaged in its purposes. But the latter requires both an understanding and ownership of the purposes.

Nevertheless, the equality of believers and responsibility to Christ does not imply equal entitlement to roles or offices in the church. Role eligibility is a function of gifts first but also, indisputably, of character (capability and suitability). These gifts and capabilities are diverse, enabling the array of roles required by the church and thereby enabling the church to function properly. People are to be equally regarded, as the imagery of the body implies. No role or function implies inferiority of person or being. Moreover, roles do not define status, though perhaps they call for humility if one has abilities that others may not have. There is no ground for pride here, just as there is no ground for superiority in the role of husbands in the marriage relationship. Respect for the person exercising the role should be given, not for their status but for the burden of responsibility they bear in exercising the role.

Roles and offices

Scholars have debated whether a role is also an office, i.e. a position to be held, or essentially a function to perform or even one that is performed unintentionally.[28] A simple reading of Scripture, with its common practice of appointing elders and deacons, might imply that a leadership role is also an office. The long history of this practice might stifle tendencies to call it into question. There is a hermeneutical problem here that involves methodologies of interpretation, as well as assumptions about language and culture. The appointment of deacons was initially a pragmatic decision, yet their role did not preclude some of them from engaging in eloquent, powerful and provocative teaching, which also contributed to an exodus of the Christians from Jerusalem to Antioch and other places after Stephen's death.

By giving lifetime tenure to elders and deacons, a role is effectively elevated to an office. Is tenure simply a wise provision rather than a means to establish and protect a role? Did it arise with the passage of institutionalization or did it emerge out of

27 K. Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), chapter 1.4.

28 D. Tidball, *Ministry by the Book* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2008), 121, 143, 171.

practice and potentially crowd out a biblical principle? In other words, did structure overtake principle?

The NT writers did not seem especially concerned about structure, and in an essentially church planting environment, that would be understandable. Flexibility of approach offered less hindrance to the gospel than any formalization of structure. Leaders and overseers were important and probably emerged out of practical necessity,[29] as those able to teach, serve and provide wise counsel and prophecy were recognized as leaders**.** Yet some means of identifying and encouraging people to act upon their gifts would have been necessary to avoid inappropriate assertiveness. However, Scripture has limited detail about the processes by which elders were identified or elected.[30]

In any case, the governance practices of the synagogue would have influenced the early church, especially in Jerusalem,[31] and were presumably continued as far as practicable as the early church took some time to break free from the Jewish church. After all, the Jewish assembly was their heritage because they had understood God to have been working through them as a people, and Paul continued to 'view it within the larger framework of the community of Judaism'.[32] Despite the dispersal of believers after Stephen's death, the synagogue was usually and intentionally a starting point for Paul's work on his missionary journeys.

Elders and deacons are mentioned in the NT, deacons being distinguished by the function they served in the Jerusalem church. Elders were commonly and understandably appointed in new churches. It is reasonable to assume that some type of formal acknowledgement of leadership occurred. Yet we need not assume that the role was formally mandated. The various functions of elders, rulers, administrators and teachers also suggest some ambiguity and variability, and it is noteworthy that the letters of Paul to the churches do not address the elders directly. The terms 'elders', or 'presbyters', and 'deacons' have been preserved in many structures today, whilst priests also remain but with a nuanced meaning that limits their intermediary function in mainline Protestant churches.

Applying principles

The headship of Christ as a fundamental principle may be undermined by positions of excessive authority or power of personality, which divert the attention of members from the Godhead. Similarly, any excess in the exercise of power or authority, intentional or otherwise, which creates barriers to fellowship between those in authority and others can do the same. Spreading power and authority, e.g. with the creation of boards, and removing entitlements for life or very long terms can ameliorate these influences. On this principle, the dominant individual, a sort of de facto single eldership, becomes much harder to justify than multiple eldership.

29 Clarke, *A Pauline Theology*.

30 Tidball, *Ministry by the Book*, 171.

31 D. W. B. Robinson, 'Church'; also K. Giles, 'Church Order, Government', in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments,* ed. R. Martin and P. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

32 Ellis, *Pauline Theology*, 133ff.

Equality of persons may be affected by formal rights to be engaged in decisions about selection of pastors, elders, ministry directions and resources—in other words, the strategic aspects of church governance.

Problems may also occur where there is a significant distinction between clergy and laity, or between paid pastoral staff and other workers who may operate in roles equivalent to or essentially as pastors or teachers, such as small group leaders or missionary support coordinators. Here, the problem is not essentially a function of structure but a matter of how humble and inclusive those in authority are prepared to be.

Differences in gifts, roles and ways of exercising responsibility allow for variation in structure and caution against rigid limits on allowable functions within roles, such as between teaching and administrative elders or between pastors and deacons. Management skills assume more significance in large organizations with greater complexity, diversity of activities, scale, legislative responsibilities and community expectations. The capacity for self-education and lay teaching is considerable and can be exploited particularly by the use of cell or small groups. In large churches, the functions of pastor and teacher may be both dispersed through the congregation and focused on the primary preacher.

Collective decision-making challenges the concept of single eldership or any system that allows a high concentration of power. The case for a close supportive working relationship among those carrying responsibility for oversight, administration and leadership at any time is compelling. However, responsibility and authority go hand in hand, and the injunction to obey those who rule over you (Heb 13:17) applies as much for the sake of the pastors and acknowledgement of their devotion as for their authority (note the New English Bible translation).

Servant leadership is a key discipline for those in power to exercise. It challenges some popular concepts of leadership and suggests that the very concept of leadership should be explored carefully in a Christian context. There are many ways in which to conceive leadership, and even more theories in the management literature to build on these fundamentals. The task-oriented, entrepreneurial leader characteristic of some Western nations, as Elmer[33] points out, may be appropriate in some contexts but inappropriate in others. The limited sovereignty required of Israel's kings, noted above, is a starting point. Paul was selective in his use of terms for leaders, avoiding those that carried implications of a dictatorial, punitive or authoritarian nature.[34] Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet on his last night with them is a powerful corrective. Earlier that night, the disciples had been discussing their anticipated status in heaven!

The hero as leader has been glorified in Western thought, but this is not an obvious model in Scripture. It can bring success, which may appear to justify it, and it may be appropriate or even preferable in some contexts, but it needs to be employed wisely with able mentors and supporting elders, both to lead by example and to offer protection and supportive fellowship. It risks leaving a vacuum upon resignation or retirement. Succession poses challenges to churches and requires wise boards,

33 Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections*.

34 Clarke, *Pauline Theology*.

ideally accompanied by congregational engagement in that task. A well-established church is unlikely to be attractive to a replica of the dynamic leader who planted it.

Protections from the abuse of power are necessary. Sanctions are likely to be found in both denominational regulation and civil law. In Australia, governing members of independent churches are liable to civil action in the case of insolvency or financial distress, whether by intent (fraud) or negligence. In Australia, simply ignorance or being too slow to act is no defence, as a major case in Victoria, *Commonwealth Bank of Australia v Friedrich & Ors* (1991), demonstrated. The board members of the emergency services agency in the state of Victoria were jailed for failing to rein in the profligacy of the CEO. Alliances between congregations can help with resources, standards and expectations. They can also provide guidance and limit the effects of insularity on practice.

The relational side of the church is important. Churches should aspire to be friendly, welcoming and supportive to all. The principle of the equality of believers should apply. Beyond this, the modelling of selfless love and compassion should start with senior pastors. They may need to be selective in large congregations, but failure to model core values can be serious, as many recent cases have shown.

A global perspective on the Great Commission has two important implications. The first is that an interest in mission should extend beyond the immediate geographic area of the local congregation, reasonably soon after establishment. A church plant will be preoccupied by mission to its immediate area at the outset. However, expressing global interest does not require active interest in every part of the world. Selected gospel work in several places, preferably including other nations, and supporting mission that is reliant on indigenous leadership[35] are good first steps. This involves some ongoing linkage or ties with people, organizations and congregations beyond the local church. Second, this perspective could be extended to imply that alliances are essential, to remind ourselves that our congregation is part of a work going on everywhere and to avoid the risk of insularity and sectarianism.

Operating in alliance involves not only some formal association with other congregations, so that there is a sense of being part of the larger kingdom, but a readiness to be involved informally, e.g. sharing ideas and material in religious instruction in schools, or the inter-mission agency cooperativeness that occurs in some places and has been adopted as policy by some mission agencies.

Conclusions

Institutionalization is a powerful force that can both guide and constrain churches in their task of fulfilling the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. It can be managed, but its weaknesses spawn attempts to be free of its constraints. These attempts are often led by dynamic individuals reacting to elements of the structure that constrained them. Their work can be very effective and a much-needed stirring up of institutions, but it carries risk. To some, institutionalization is a departure from

35 For thought-provoking perspectives, see R. Allen, *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours?* 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1927); E. Crossman, *Mountain Rain: A Biography of James Fraser* (Bletchley, UK: Authentic Media, rpt. 2006). Local Leaders Australia is a ministry support organization that employs specific protocols to ensure the priority of indigenous leadership in the colleges it supports.

the biblical model and therefore to be discarded. That, however, implies that the biblical model inferred from the early church was the only intended model for all time, and it is also a view unrelated to the governance models of the Old Testament. Growth and sheer size will almost unavoidably bring institutionalization in their wake. The response is neither to abandon institutions nor to deny alternatives but to recognize the principles of good governance.

At the core of this argument lies the notion that the imagery of the body of Christ in Scripture is best reflected in an arrangement where each believer has a sense of ownership of the whole, not as a follower, second-tier member (e.g. lay or voluntary worker), de facto customer or de facto employee. That argument carries with it a sense of equality of members whilst also requiring a level of engagement in the strategic directions of the church that is more than some members appear or assume to contemplate. It also carries an obligation for the most prominent leader to be supported and protected by wise colleagues.

This is not an argument for participatory democracy in churches where size makes that process cumbersome. Representative democracy is fine, but single eldership is very questionable. To that extent, the three commonly understood models of church structure are not necessarily to be ranked according to preference. All are potentially functional and there may be as much variation within as between the structures; for instance, under some episcopal systems, a parish pastor may have more authority within a local jurisdiction than the bishop or archbishop has across their jurisdiction.

The argument acknowledges that churches may not begin with the same governance model that might be adopted later over time. A church planter may hold a more dominant role for some time, but as the church matures, a form of governance should emerge that reflects the biblical principles of the body and priesthood of believers, united to form a holy temple.

This will mean that mature churches most likely come to rely on boards to maintain focus, direction, and discipline rather than a dominant individual. Young churches may be very dependent on a leader and simple governance structures. Yet leaders should be keen to empower their people to take responsibility early, and John Wesley showed that this could be done with the poor and uneducated.[36]

Special attention should be given to board composition and to training existing and prospective board members. They should learn to delegate management roles and focus on maintaining the vision of the church—ensuring that appropriate procedures are in place, supporting the people who implement the vision by positive actions, and protecting them from failure. This requires a willingness to accept differences in approach, recognize gifts and suppress personal preferences about how things are done. It requires far more attention to the education of board members than normally occurs, especially in churches where boards might be composed of less experienced people or predominantly businesspeople accustomed to being the boss. Those in corporate structures or civil service will have more relevant experience.

36 H. A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), chapters 4ff.

Lay engagement with church governance should be enabled by education, encouragement, and formal mechanisms to contribute to decisions. Mechanisms to engage unpaid members in advisory as well as decision-making roles should exist. Unpaid participants may carry a lighter overall burden than paid staff, but the system should convey the recognition of equality enshrined in the critical images of the church portrayed in the New Testament.

Emerging from this argument are several principles that should be reflected in church life. First, isolationism is undesirable both organizationally and missionally. The kingdom of God is global, and work is being conducted by faithful people who will differ to varying extents in theology and practice. Isolationism can be a form of judgement on others, that they are somehow inferior or in error or unequal. Such judgements frequently rely more on our own perceptions of Scripture, culturally influenced as they inevitably are, than on what Scripture contains.

Overall, the principles regarding good governance available in Scripture go well beyond the relatively few passages explicitly discussing governance structures, on which so much debate in Christian circles has focused. These passages encourage multi-elder forms of governance, where the concept of elder is interpreted broadly and as a role rather than an office. Moreover, and ironically, the modern secular best practice of a public company may capture the essence of those principles better than some forms of church governance currently practised.

Acknowledgement

Through the process of submitting this paper to the *Evangelical Review of Theology*, I was introduced to the writings of former World Evangelical Alliance secretary general Thomas Schirrmacher.[37] My position would be a little more flexible than his regarding the functions of elders and deacons, but I do not see any other significant difference in our interpretations of Scripture. Schirrmacher concludes that structure does not depend on terminology, that proper methods of government cannot be decided in theory, that the delineation of three classic forms has little to do with reality (as there is too much overlap in practice within and between them), and that in any case the practices recorded in Scripture are more variable. No structure or constitution, both of us agree, is infallible. When a governance failure occurs, the church needs spiritually gifted, independent, courageous leaders to encourage people and congregations and to call them back to their duties, as exemplified by the prophets and by Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. Therefore, pastors themselves need counsellors and mentors. This point by Schirrmacher is an important extension of what I have stated above regarding governance arrangements.

These conclusions suggest that essentially, what is required for a church to function well is spiritual wisdom, which involves both understanding and experience, as well as the ability to learn from and connect these two elements. I believe the points I have made in this paper provide some ideas that are relevant to that process. Understanding the nature or meaning of wisdom and the process of acquiring it, however, is worthy of a paper of its own.

37 T. Schirrmacher, 'Church Government: The Three Levels of Government in the New Testament Church', *Christianity & Society* 19, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 27–30.

ERT (2025) 49:2, 115–128

The Missing Cup: Covenant Fulfilment and Eucharistic Transformation in the Passover Tradition

Jonathan K. Corrado

The Passover, instituted in Exodus 12, stands among the most formative events in Israel's redemptive history. Rooted in God's decisive act of deliverance from Egyptian bondage, it became a foundational pattern of identity, remembrance, and worship. The liturgy was precise and purposeful: a lamb without blemish, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs—each element rich with theological meaning.

Wine is not mentioned in the Exodus account, but its absence from the prescribed elements invites theological reflection. Rather than signalling prohibition or omission, this silence may reflect the somber tone of the original event—a meal of haste and survival rather than celebration.

This paper argues that Jesus' use of wine at the Last Supper was a deliberate and revelatory act—not introducing a new element but reinterpreting its covenantal significance within Second Temple tradition. By offering a cup not prescribed in Exodus 12 but present in Second Temple Passover practice (e.g. Jubilees 49:6), Christ transformed the Passover meal into a covenantal ordinance that inaugurated the New Covenant in His blood. Jesus did not introduce wine into the Passover meal for the first time. Rather, within the Second Temple tradition, where wine was already present, Jesus reinterpreted the cup in covenantal terms that pointed to the fulfilment of Israel's story in his death and the inauguration of the New Covenant. This act was neither arbitrary nor merely symbolic; it fulfilled a typological trajectory long embedded in Israel's redemptive story. In doing so, Jesus reconstituted the meal—not as a sacrificial re-presentation, but as a covenant renewal ordinance marked by remembrance, proclamation, and anticipation. This shift affirms a biblically grounded vision of the Supper as a symbolic and participatory act of obedience, centred on Christ's once-for-all atonement and sustaining believers in their ongoing communion with Him.

The argument unfolds in six parts. I first examine the Passover's original structure and the theological implications of its liturgical austerity and the absence of wine in the Exodus account. I then trace wine's covenantal role across the Old Testament before turning to Jesus' redefinition of the cup's meaning at the Last Supper. Fourth, I contrast this act with sacramental traditions that interpret the Supper as a sacrificial re-presentation, offering instead a view of the meal as a covenant renewal grounded in Scripture and the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. Fifth, I explore the

Jonathan Corrado (PhD in systems engineering, Colorado State University, USA; ThM, Liberty University, USA) is a manager and engineer in the defense and nuclear industries, as well as a Captain in the US Navy Reserve. Email: corradojk@gmail.com.

eschatological and missional dimensions of the cup. Finally, I offer pastoral and liturgical reflections that invite the church to embrace the Supper as a visible word of gospel grace and hope.

Rather than trying to fill in a theological silence around what Moses omitted, this paper illuminates the revelatory force of what Jesus fulfilled. In doing so, it helps the church see the Table not merely as a ritual to observe, but as a dramatic reversal where absence becomes abundance, and where the joy once withheld now flows in covenantal promise.

The original Passover: a meal without wine

The institution of the Passover in Exodus 12 marks a defining moment in Israel's redemptive history. Far from a mere ritual observance, the Passover inaugurates Israel's identity as a covenant people through a liturgy of obedience, remembrance, and divine mercy. The narrative unfolds with deliberate precision, as God instructs Moses and Aaron to prepare for His climactic act of deliverance. At the centre of this preparation is the meal itself, eaten on the night of the final plague—the death of Egypt's firstborn. Each prescribed element—a lamb without blemish, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs—is richly symbolic, shaping Israel's collective memory for generations.[1] Yet amid this carefully appointed divine drama, one item is conspicuously absent: the cup.

The lamb, detailed in Exodus 12:3–10, serves as a substitutionary agent. Its blood, spread on the doorposts and lintel, marks those under God's mercy. The unleavened bread, introduced in verses 8 and 15–20, speaks to the urgency of departure—a bread of haste, purity, and separation from Egypt's leavened corruption. The bitter herbs recall the sting of bondage, embedding affliction into remembrance. Together, these elements form a theological triad: atonement, sanctification, and lament. Their instructions are joined by a posture of readiness—belts fastened, sandals on, and staffs in hand—embodying a people not yet at rest but on the cusp of redemption (Exod 12:11).[2]

Yet strikingly, there is no mention of wine. This omission cannot be ascribed to cultural unfamiliarity. Wine was well-known among the patriarchs and later enshrined in Israel's sacrificial system (e.g. Exod 29:40; Num 15:5, 10). It signified divine blessing, covenantal joy, and priestly benediction (Gen 14:18; Deut 7:13; Ps 104:15).[3] Its absence from the Exodus instructions may reflect the gravity and urgency of the moment, as the Israelite ate a meal in preparation for flight, not in festivity. Rather than interpreting this silence as intentional omission, we may better understand it as liturgical restraint appropriate to the context of survival and haste. The meal anticipated joy, but it did not yet celebrate deliverance.

This theological restraint reflects the broader narrative arc. The Passover is a threshold—not yet the Promised Land, not yet Sinai. Israel is not gathered at a table

1 Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 85–88.

2 Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 184–86.

3 Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 80–81; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 408.

of victory but watching for mercy with blood-marked doors. The covenant is being initiated, not renewed. Joy will come, but only after the sea, wilderness, fire, and cloud. In that sense, the Passover is eschatologically incomplete, an act of deliverance awaiting its fulness.[4]

Centuries later, that fulfilment began to unfold. During the Second Temple period, Jewish tradition expanded the Passover liturgy into what became the Seder. Texts such as Jubilees 49:6 (from the 2nd century BCE) attest to the presence of wine at Passover celebrations well before the Mishnah. As Milgrom notes, the post-biblical development of the Passover liturgy reflects both theological adaptation and the realities of a post-Temple Judaism, culminating in the Seder's codification in the Mishnah.[5] By the time of the Mishnah (2nd–3rd century CE), the meal featured four cups of wine, codified in a post-Temple context (Pesachim 10), each paired with a promise from Exodus 6:6–7: 'I will bring you out', 'I will deliver you', 'I will redeem you', and 'I will take you to be my people.' These cups infused the meal with joy and narrative structure, shifting it from affliction to exodus, remembrance to praise.[6] Wine, once absent, became central to the rhythm of redemption.

Blenkinsopp observes that such ritual expansions often served to reinforce communal identity and narrative continuity in the absence of the sacrificial system.[7] As Milgrom notes, such developments reflect the adaptive resilience of Jewish liturgy in response to historical rupture, while Blenkinsopp emphasizes their role in reinforcing communal identity in the absence of the Temple. This paper engages these insights not merely as historical background, but as the essential context for understanding Jesus's appropriation of the cup.[8] As Sanders states, the formalization of the four cups in the Passover parallels similar liturgical developments in other Second Temple festivals, where scriptural narratives were expanded through blessings, symbolic foods, and narrative frameworks to reinforce theological identity in a post-Temple context.[9]

This liturgical development provides crucial context for the Gospels. When Jesus, in the upper room, takes the cup and says, 'This is the new covenant in my blood' (Lk 22:20), He is not merely following Seder custom. He is reinterpreting the cup's meaning in light of His impending sacrifice, transforming a traditional element into a covenantal proclamation. The cup, never prescribed in Exodus 12, becomes the centrepiece of a new covenant ordinance. Christ does not merely adapt the Passover; He fulfils it. The absence of wine in Exodus finds its canonical resolution not in Seder ritual, but in the kingdom cup Christ lifts as fulfilment. What was withheld under

4 Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 350–52.

5 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 1987–88.

6 Tim Hegg, 'Four Cups and Their Meaning in the Passover Seder', *TorahResource*, https://torahresource.com/?p=92749.

7 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Judaism: The First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 77–79.

8 Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*; Blenkinsopp, *Judaism*, 140–41; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 137–38.

9 Sanders, *Judaism*, 136–38.

death's shadow is now given under the light of redemption—transformed from expectation into enactment.[10]

This transformation is a covenantal proclamation. The joy deferred in Egypt is fulfilled in Christ's blood. His use of wine is not an innovation but a consummation or eschatological completion, imbuing the cup with new covenantal significance. The cup He offers is not simply a continuation of Jewish tradition, but the fulfilment of what Exodus 12 anticipated. The silence of the first Passover becomes the stage for the speech of the Gospels. The emphasis is not what on Moses omitted but on what Christ fulfilled.

Wine in the Old Testament: symbolism, covenant, and sacrifice

Although wine is absent from the original Passover institution, it is deeply woven into the liturgical, sacrificial, and symbolic fabric of the Old Testament. From patriarchal narratives to prophetic oracles, wine consistently appears as a multi-layered symbol, denoting joy, covenantal blessing, sacrificial devotion, and eschatological fulfilment. This rich constellation of meanings forms a theological arc that finds its fulfilment in Jesus' redefinition of the cup at the Last Supper.[11]

One of the earliest cultic uses of wine appears in the drink offering, where wine is poured out before the Lord alongside the daily sacrifices. In Exodus 29:40 and Numbers 15:5–10, wine is presented as a libation—poured, not consumed—symbolizing joyful devotion and covenantal surrender. Unlike the grain, which signifies sustenance, or the burnt offering, which represents atonement, the wine concludes the triad with celebration.[12] Notably, this offering belongs not to the Passover but to the rhythms of Tabernacle and Temple worship.

Elsewhere in Scripture, wine is portrayed as a gracious gift from God—a sign of covenant blessing and relational intimacy. Psalm 104:15 celebrates the Lord who gives 'wine to gladden the heart of man'. Deuteronomy 7:13 and 11:14 include wine among the blessings promised for covenant obedience. The land God gives is not only fertile but festive, abounding in vineyards and vintage. In these texts, wine signifies more than prosperity; it reflects Yahweh's nearness and generosity.[13] Its presence reveals that covenant life is not merely legal or contractual but celebratory and communal.

Prophetic literature deepens the symbol. In Isaiah 25:6, the Lord prepares an eschatological feast of 'aged wine well refined' on Mount Zion—a vision of redemption where death is swallowed and sorrow ends. Yet in Isaiah 63:3, the winepress becomes an image of wrath, and in Joel 1:10, dried-up wine signals divine judgement. Wine, then, is a dynamic element; it may represent blessing or curse, joy or judgement,

10 Craig L. Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 123–25.

11 Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 349–51.

12 Peter J. Leithart, 'The Theology of the Drink Offering', *Theopolis Institute*, 17 July 2018, https://theopolisinstitute.com/the-theology-of-the-drink-offering-2/.

13 Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentary, vol. 3 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 218–20.

depending on covenant faithfulness.[14] Fishbane highlights that in Jewish exegetical tradition, wine serves as a polyvalent symbol, capable of holding together motifs of blessing, covenant, and eschatological hope.

Wine also appears in covenantal episodes beyond cult and prophecy. In Genesis 14:18, Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God most high, brings bread and wine to bless Abram, prefiguring hospitality, mediation, and blessing, all of which are later echoed in Christ.[15] In Deuteronomy 14:26, Israelites are instructed to use part of their tithe to purchase wine 'and rejoice before the Lord', integrating wine into sacred celebration and covenant renewal. These episodes portray wine not merely as permitted but sanctified—woven into the joy of life with God. Hebrews later identifies Melchizedek as a type of Christ, the eternal priest whose offering of bread and wine anticipates the Messiah's priestly role and covenantal provision.[16]

Together, these threads form a coherent theological tapestry. Wine is a gift, an offering, a promise, and sometimes a warning. Its symbolic reach—spanning joy and judgement, blood and blessing—prepares it to carry the weight of gospel fulfilment.

That the original Passover lacked wine in its Exodus formulation is thus liturgically and theologically significant. It signals restraint appropriate to the context of judgement and haste—a silence that awaited its appointed resolution. When Jesus takes the cup and declares it 'the new covenant in My blood', He does not merely enhance a tradition; He completes it. The wine that once signified joy, sacrifice, and eschatological hope is now imbued with the meaning of the cross. It becomes the cup of suffering and the cup of salvation. What was not prescribed in Exodus now overflows with gospel clarity: the symbolic richness of wine finds its covenantal climax in the hands of the Messiah.

Jesus and the cup: typology fulfilled in the New Covenant

The accounts of the Last Supper in the Synoptic Gospels mark a watershed moment in redemptive history. On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus gathers His disciples for a meal structured around familiar Passover liturgy—bread, blessing, shared remembrance. But then He does what no previous covenant mediator had done: He lifts a cup and redefines the meal around Himself. In doing so, He does not merely adapt Jewish tradition; He inaugurates the New Covenant through a theologically revelatory act. This covenantal redefinition of the cup also echoes a deeper typological pattern rooted in the Melchizedek story of Genesis 14. In lifting the cup at the Last Supper, Jesus completes the Melchizedekian typology, offering bread and wine as covenantal signs of His priestly mediation and redemptive mission. Rather than initiating the use of wine in the Passover tradition, Jesus imbues the existing cup with new covenantal significance, transforming the table from a memorial of deliverance into a covenantal ordinance of participation and proclamation.[17]

14 John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 24 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 328–30.

15 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 315–16.

16 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 142–44.

17 Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 123–25.

In the Gospel narratives (Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25; Lk 22:14–20), Jesus breaks the bread and identifies it with His body. He then takes a cup, gives thanks, and declares, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mk 14:24). Luke adds, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' (Lk 22:20, ESV), echoing Jeremiah 31:31–34. The language is unmistakably covenantal and sacrificial. It recalls Exodus 24:8, where Moses, having read the Book of the Covenant, sprinkles the people with blood and declares, 'Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you.' But Jesus is not merely quoting; He is replacing the old with a greater fulfilment. His blood, not that of bulls or goats, ratifies the covenant once for all (Heb 9:12–15).[18]

This meaning is amplified by Jesus' eschatological declaration: 'I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom' (Mt 26:29). The cup is rooted in the present self-offering of Christ, but it gestures toward the messianic banquet. It is both retrospective and anticipatory—grounded in the cross, oriented toward the consummation. The cup is thus covenant seal and kingdom sign, binding the church to Christ now while pointing toward the table still to come.[19]

The cup also draws into view the weight of Jesus' suffering. In Gethsemane, He prays, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me' (Mt 26:39). This petition echoes Old Testament imagery where the cup symbolizes divine wrath (cf. Isa 51:17; Jer 25:15). The 'cup of blessing' offered to the disciples (1 Cor 10:16) is the same cup of judgement Jesus alone drinks to its dregs. Although Jesus alone bore the full measure of divine judgement at the cross, his words to James and John (Mk 10:38–39) indicate that his followers would share in a measure of his sufferings. This distinction allows the imagery of blessing and judgement to coexist without conflation. Yet even this cup is not exclusive to Christ. He tells James and John, 'The cup that I drink you will drink' (Mk 10:39), signalling that discipleship entails participation in His suffering. Here is the paradox of the gospel: the Lamb absorbs wrath so that the redeemed may drink joy. The cup becomes liquid grace—judgement transformed into communion.[20]

Crucially, this act is not only vertical, between Christ and the believer, but also communal. Jesus commands, 'Drink of it, all of you' (Mt 26:27), instituting a shared act of covenant renewal. Paul later writes that in partaking of the cup, the church proclaims the Lord's death until He comes (1 Cor 11:26). The Table becomes a visible word, a congregational confession of Christ's sufficiency and the church's unity.

---

18 Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 395–97. Jesus' cry from the cross, 'It is finished' (Jn 19:30; Greek *tetelestai*), carried the force of both commercial and legal finality in the ancient world. It was used to signify a debt paid in full or a sentence fully served. The theological implication is profound: there remains no ongoing payment or presentation required for sin.

19 Ralph F. Wilson, 'The Lord's Supper and the Great Banquet', *JesusWalk Bible Study Series*, https://www.jesuswalk.com/lords-supper/9_banquet.htm.

20 Steven Lee, 'The Cup Consumed for Us', *Desiring God*, 7 April 2014, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-cup-consumed-for-us.

This vision of the Supper affirms its role not as a repeated sacrifice but as a memorial—obediently observed, declaring Christ's once-for-all atonement.[21]

Jesus' use of the cup is thus a profoundly theological and pastoral act. It fulfils Old Testament symbolism, inaugurates the New Covenant in His blood, and establishes the church's pattern of worship. The wine once absent from the Exodus account is now offered in the kingdom—not in haste, but with hope; not in dread, but in delight. In this cup, Jesus does not reclaim what was withheld but reinterprets what was long present—pouring out forgiveness, fellowship, and a future with Him.

Communion as covenant renewal, not sacrificial re-presentation

The significance of Jesus' redefinition of the cup at the Last Supper becomes especially clear when compared to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist as a sacrificial re-presentation. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Eucharist is 'the memorial of Christ's Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice' (CCC §1362).[22] In this view, the mass is not a repetition of Calvary but a mystical re-presentation of Christ's once-for-all offering, truly and substantially made present through the priest's liturgical action.[23]

While this framework affirms the uniqueness of Christ's death, it still views the Eucharist as a true sacrifice—unbloody, yet sacrificial—mediated through a priest acting *in persona Christi*. This understanding, while historically continuous within Catholic tradition, depends upon a sacramental ontology in which Christ's priesthood is exercised through the ordained minister in an ongoing manner.[24] This structure reflects elements of the Old Testament cultus, where repeated offerings and priestly mediation characterized Israel's worship.[25]

By contrast, the New Testament—particularly the epistle to the Hebrews—declares the sufficiency and finality of Christ's work. Christ 'has appeared once for all … to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb 9:26); 'by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified' (Heb 10:14). The logic of the New Covenant is not repetition but completion. As Hebrews 10:18 affirms,

---

21 Paul F. M. Zahl, *Grace in Practice: A Theology of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 163–65.

22 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §1362.

23 Council of Trent, *Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass*, Session 22, Chapter 2 (1562), in *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1978), 147–49. Though the Roman Catholic Church asserts that the Eucharist does not repeat Calvary but instead 'makes present' the one sacrifice of Christ, the theological result functionally mirrors repetition. The action of the priest—believed to consecrate the elements and re-present Christ—stands in tension with the scriptural declaration that Christ's sacrifice is once-for-all (Heb 10:10).

24 For a discussion of sacramental ontology and the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as the ongoing exercise of Christ's priesthood through ordained ministers, see Joseph Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 28–35; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), §§1362–72.

25 Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 79–83.

'Where there is forgiveness … there is no longer any offering for sin.' The cross is not to be ritually renewed but remembered with awe, gratitude, and obedient trust.[26] Although some Protestant traditions, most notably Lutheranism, affirm a 'real presence' of Christ in the Supper, they reject any notion of repeated or ongoing sacrifice. Reformed traditions, likewise, emphasize a 'real spiritual presence' mediated by the Spirit through faith, yet without any re-sacrificing of Christ's body and blood.[27] A symbolic and covenantal view of the Table, rooted in Scripture's emphasis on Christ's once-for-all atonement, understands the Supper not as sacramental mediation but as a visible word, declaring redemption accomplished and renewing the church's communion with Christ.

In this light, the Lord's Supper is a covenant renewal ordinance. Just as Israel reaffirmed its covenantal identity through acts of remembrance, confession, and shared meals (e.g. Exod 24; Deut 29; Josh 24), so too the church gathers at the Table to renew allegiance to Christ and its identity as His body. In this remembrance, God's people do not offer Christ again; they affirm the sufficiency of His once-for-all sacrifice.[28]

This covenantal lens is embedded in the Last Supper's language. Jesus' words, 'This is my blood of the covenant', echo Exodus 24:8, but unlike at Sinai, there is no altar, no animal, no intermediary. The absence of such cultic elements underscores the radical shift from shadow to substance: the covenant mediator and the covenant sacrifice are one and the same person.[29] Only the incarnate Son voluntarily offers

26 Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford, *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ until He Comes* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 85–88. Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 11 underscores that the Supper is a proclamation of Christ's death, not a continuation of it. He never suggests that the bread and wine become Christ, but that they function as visible words that call the church to remember, receive, and proclaim the sufficiency of the cross.

27 On the Reformed doctrine of the 'real spiritual presence' as distinct from both Roman Catholic transubstantiation and Lutheran sacramental union, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.17.10–12; Michael Horton, *The Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 87–96.

28 Meredith G. Kline, 'By Oath Consigned', in *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 63–65. The claim that Christ is physically localized in the Eucharist raises a profound theological tension. Roman Catholic theology teaches that grace is infused into the soul through the sacraments, such that justification becomes both the initial moment of transformation and the beginning of a process requiring cooperation. In contrast, the Reformers upheld that justification is forensic and declarative, as God legally imputes Christ's righteousness to the sinner apart from works (Rom 4:5). This distinction preserves the biblical order: justification by faith alone, followed by sanctification as a work of the Spirit in the believer's life. The sacramental system of Rome blurs this line, making righteousness contingent upon continual participation and ecclesial mediation. The result is a system in which the believer's standing before God is never decisively secured but perpetually administered.

29 Cf. Heb 8:5; 9:11–14; 10:1, where the old covenant cultus is described as a 'shadow' of the heavenly reality fulfilled in Christ. See also Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 144–46; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 72–75.

Himself. The cup is no longer a vessel of ongoing sacrifice; rather, it is the emblem of completed redemption and ongoing communion.[30]

Paul reinforces this view in 1 Corinthians 10:16, describing the cup as 'a participation in the blood of Christ'. He does not imply a fresh sacrifice, but shared fellowship in redemptive benefits. The meal proclaims Christ's death and shapes the people of God until He returns (1 Cor 11:26). It is a symbolic ordinance of remembrance, not re-sacrifice.[31]

In sum, the Lord's Supper is best seen through the lens of covenant renewal. It is not a sacrificial altar but a table of fellowship. It is not the reliving of Calvary but the reaffirmation of its triumph. The wine Jesus redefined—present in Second Temple Passover tradition but not prescribed in Exodus 12—is not the continuation of sacrificial ritual, but the joyful seal of a covenant already secured. In lifting the cup, the church declares again that Christ's work is finished, our hope is sure, and our covenant is renewed.

The eschatological and missional dimensions of the cup

The cup Jesus offers at the Last Supper holds more than retrospective meaning. It symbolizes not only His impending death but also a vessel of eschatological promise and missional proclamation. In Matthew 26:29, Jesus declares, 'I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'[32] Far from a liturgical aside, this statement functions as a theological hinge, placing the cup between past fulfilment and future consummation. The Lord's Supper is not merely a backward-facing memorial; it is a covenant meal that antici-

30 John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus*, vol. 2 (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2001), 84–86. Jesus frequently used metaphorical language to describe Himself (e.g. 'I am the door', 'I am the vine', 'I am the bread of life'). In John 6:35, He equates eating His flesh with coming to Him and believing. While some Christian traditions interpret John 6 as eucharistic, viewing Jesus' words as a foreshadowing of the Lord's Supper, others emphasize the immediate context, in which Jesus clarifies that eating is metaphorical for faith. This context helps frame the Lord's Supper not as a literal consumption, but as a covenantal response of faith. Additionally, the claim that Christ is physically localized in the Eucharist raises a profound theological tension: Can the infinite, omnipresent God be contained in a consecrated host? The Second Commandment warns against representing the invisible God through physical forms, lest worship drift from divine truth into tangible misrepresentation. To affirm that the glorified Christ—now seated bodily at the right hand of the Father (Heb 10:10; Acts 2:33)—is bodily summoned to each altar risks collapsing the transcendent into the tactile and reintroducing the very mediation Christ fulfilled and superseded. While the Incarnation was a real historical embodiment, it does not imply that Christ remains physically accessible through ritual objects. The heavens declare His glory, not a tabernacle; the gospel proclaims His sufficiency, not a repeated consecration.

31 Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 759–61.

32 This statement may allude to the traditional fourth cup of the Passover Seder, known as the Cup of Praise. Whereas Jesus likely shared the first three cups—Sanctification, Deliverance, and Redemption—during the meal, the Gospels suggest He intentionally refrained from the final cup. In doing so, He left the liturgy open-ended, anticipating its ultimate fulfilment in the eschatological banquet (cf. Lk 22:17–20). This reading reinforces the Supper's forward-looking character and the church's hope for the consummated kingdom.

pates the marriage supper of the Lamb and aligns the church's worship with its eschatological hope.[33]

This future orientation is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. Isaiah 25:6–8 envisions a feast prepared by the Lord on Mount Zion, filled with rich food and 'aged wine well refined'. But this banquet is more than lavish—it is redemptive. In that setting, God 'will swallow up death forever' and 'wipe away tears from all faces'. The imagery is covenantal, climactic, and restorative. When Jesus speaks of drinking the cup anew in the kingdom, He invokes this prophetic hope and places the Supper within the arc of God's redemptive plan. The wine present in the Second Temple Passover—though absent from Exodus 12—is redefined by Christ as a foretaste of the kingdom feast.[34] This prophetic vision converges with Revelation's marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9), where covenant completion and kingdom joy are pictured in banquet imagery that resonates with Isaiah's well-aged wine.[35]

Paul reinforces this dynamic in 1 Corinthians 11:26: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.' The Supper is remembrance (*anamnesis*) and proclamation (*katangellō*). More than reflection, it is embodied gospel and a liturgical declaration: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. The Table becomes a liminal space between the 'already' of accomplished redemption and the 'not yet' of consummated hope. In this framework, the cup functions as covenant seal and kingdom pledge.[36]

This eschatological vision carries profound missional implications. The Supper is not a private, inward ritual but a public witness to core gospel truths. As John Mark Hicks notes, the Table is a 'gospel meal' refracting gospel light in every direction: upward in thanksgiving, inward in repentance, outward in proclamation, and forward in hope.[37] To drink the cup is to receive grace and to be sent. It is embodied theology—a summons to remember Christ's death and live in light of His reign. The mission of God unfolds between resurrection and return, entrusted to the church and nourished at the Table.

The communal nature of the meal amplifies its missional force. Paul writes, 'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? … We who are many are one body' (1 Cor 10:16–17). Communion is never merely individual. It unites the body of Christ around a common table, forming and reforming the church in grace. The Supper gathers the scattered and sends them out as ambassadors of reconciliation. The Table is not the terminus of mission but its launchpad.[38]

These dimensions should shape the church's liturgical imagination. Too often the Supper is reduced to introspection, disconnected from kingdom joy and gospel urgency. But Scripture presents it as celebration, unity, and hope. It is a foretaste of

33 Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness*, 123–25.

34 Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 19 (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 358.

35 Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84–85.

36 Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 879–81.

37 John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2002), 77–89.

38 Gordon T. Smith, *A Holy Meal: The Lord's Supper in the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 89–92.

the feast to come (Rev 19:9)—an ordinance tethered not only to Calvary but to Christ's glory. While Revelation 19 does not mention wine explicitly, its apocalyptic symbolism does not negate the banquet imagery; Isaiah 25's vision of a feast with 'well-refined wine' provides the canonical backdrop that Jesus evokes when he vows to drink it 'new' in the kingdom. This eschatological framing aligns the Supper with what Richard B. Hays calls the 'conversion of the imagination', where the church learns to see its present life in light of the scriptural promises of God's future.[39] To drink the cup is to declare allegiance to the crucified and risen King and to long for the day when every tear is wiped away and every nation joins the song.[40]

In sum, the cup is not merely the seal of the New Covenant; it is the signpost of the kingdom and the rallying cry of mission. It is memory and hope, communion and commission. In lifting it, the church proclaims that the Lamb has triumphed, the kingdom is breaking in, and the mission continues until the Bridegroom drinks anew with His people in glory.

Pastoral and liturgical implications for the church today

The theological insights explored in this study—particularly the absence of wine in the original Passover and Christ's intentional redefinition of the cup at the Last Supper—carry significant implications for how the church understands and practices the Lord's Supper. If communion is a covenant renewal meal grounded in His once-for-all atonement, then churches should recover a pastoral and liturgical vision that reflects this biblical reality.[41] The Supper is not a mystical rite or sacrificial reenactment; it is a symbolic, Christ-centred act of remembrance, proclamation, and anticipation. Properly understood, it nourishes the church's worship, discipleship, and mission.[42]

First, the tone and theological framing of communion should reflect joy, assurance, and covenantal identity. In many traditions, the Table is approached with somber introspection that can eclipse gospel assurance. Although 1 Corinthians 11:28 encourages self-examination, such reflection must occur in the context of grace and the certainty of Christ's finished work. The Supper is not a moment to relitigate guilt but to reaffirm the gospel. As the bride of Christ, the church renews her covenant with the Bridegroom—not with fear, but with confidence in His finished work. Pastors should present the Table not as a courtroom of judgement but as a covenant feast for the redeemed.[43]

---

39 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 169–72.

40 Jaap Dekker, 'Salvation for Israel and the Nations: Disputing the Interpretation of Isaiah 25:6–8 as an Announcement of Doom', *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 31, no. 2 (2021): 154–66.

41 Recent Baptist and free-church scholarship has called for a renewed emphasis on the Lord's Supper as a formative act of covenantal identity and mission. This includes efforts to recover weekly communion, deepen theological teaching on the Table, and reframe the Supper as a joyful act of gospel proclamation rather than mere introspection. See Smith, *A Holy Meal*, 63–66.

42 Bryan D. Spinks, *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to Contemporary Culture* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 112–14.

43 Michael K. W. Suh, 'Δοκιμάζω in 1 Corinthians 11:28–29 within the Ancient Mediterranean Context,' *Novum Testamentum* 62, no. 2 (2020): 121–45.

Second, the structure and symbolism of communion should reflect the theological arc from Exodus to the Gospels. The absence of wine in Exodus 12 and its climactic introduction by Jesus underscore its redemptive significance. The wine present in the Second Temple Passover is redefined by Christ as the blood of the New Covenant. Churches that minimize or omit the cup risk obscuring the very sign Jesus used to institute the New Covenant. The wine is not optional—it proclaims the cost, joy, and fulfilment of redemption.[44] The implication for practice is that both elements should be central, visible, and explained. Liturgies should honor this: the words of institution should be spoken with reverence and the cup received as both remembrance and foretaste of kingdom joy.[45]

Third, the frequency and intentionality of communion should reflect its central role. The Table is not peripheral; it is gospel proclamation. Whether celebrated weekly or less frequently, the Supper is the climactic moment where Word and ordinance meet. Here, theology becomes tangible and doctrine becomes doxology, reorienting the body of Christ around the cross and commissioning it for mission.[46]

Fourth, the communal and reconciliatory nature of the Supper must be emphasized. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul rebukes the church not only for personal unworthiness but for disregarding the unity of the body. The Table calls for reconciliation. To partake is to affirm our shared bond in Christ, signified in one loaf and one cup. In a fractured world, the Lord's Supper becomes a visible act of unity, calling for humility, repentance, and love.[47]

Fifth, the missional thrust of communion must be reclaimed. As Paul writes, we should 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26). The Supper is a visible sermon—not only inward, but outward. It invites the gathered church to bear witness to the gospel through sacred act. This means connecting the Supper

44 While the theological symbolism of wine is deeply embedded in redemptive history—from its absence in Exodus to its climactic use by Christ—some churches use unfermented grape juice out of pastoral care and doctrinal interpretation. Drawing on Jesus' reference to the 'fruit of the vine' (Mt 26:29), these congregations uphold the cup's covenantal and eschatological meaning while offering a non-alcoholic alternative that accommodates those in recovery or other contexts where alcohol could pose a barrier. When churches use grape juice with intentional liturgical framing—emphasizing covenantal joy, sacrificial fulfilment, and eschatological hope—the symbolic integrity of the cup remains intact. The key is not the alcohol content, but the theological clarity with which the element is presented and received. In contrast, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) uses water in its sacramental observance, based on Doctrine and Covenants 27:2, which states that 'it mattereth not what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink.' This LDS theology departs significantly from the biblical and historical pattern in which wine—or at a minimum, the fruit of the vine—serves as a covenantal symbol of Christ's blood. The substitution of water not only diminishes the redemptive symbolism of the cup but also reflects deeper theological divergences. In LDS doctrine, Jesus is one of a plurality of divine beings, subordinate to God the Father and distinct in essence. This cosmology stands in contrast to historic Christian orthodoxy, which affirms the singularity of God and the all-sufficiency of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. The use of water, therefore, is not merely a liturgical variation; it signals a fundamentally different understanding of Christ's person and work.

45 Peter J. Leithart, *Blessed Are the Hungry: Meditations on the Lord's Supper* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000), 45–48.

46 Smith, *A Holy Meal*, 63–66.

47 Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 879–81.

explicitly to the Great Commission, so as to remind believers that those who come to the Table are also sent from it.[48]

Finally, pastoral care around communion should emphasize accessibility, clarity, and theological depth. The Table is not a mystical ritual for the spiritual elite but a covenant renewal for all who belong to Christ. Pastors should teach the Supper's meaning clearly and regularly, helping believers understand not just what they do but why it matters, so that every act of communion shapes the church's life beyond the moment itself.[49]

In conclusion, the cup Jesus redefined—conspicuously absent in the original Passover—now stands at the centre of the church's worship. It is not a relic of ritual but a sign of covenantal joy, gospel proclamation, and eschatological hope. To recover its meaning is to recover the heart of communion as a table of remembrance and renewal, where the church lifts high the cross and declares, 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.' When we drink the cup, we do so in anticipation of that day when the Bridegroom Himself will welcome His bride to the marriage feast and drink it anew with us in His Father's kingdom.

Conclusion

The silence of the original Passover—its absence of wine amid the lamb, the bitter herbs, and the unleavened bread—was no oversight. It was a divinely orchestrated pause, a moment suspended in anticipation. The Israelites ate in haste, sandals on their feet, staffs in hand—not yet citizens of freedom, but sojourners poised for deliverance. Redeemed, yet not home; sheltered, yet not secure; chosen, yet still waiting. That night, there was blood on the doorposts but no cup on the table—sacrifice, but no celebration; survival, but not yet joy. Wine was withheld because the world had not yet known the true Lamb. The joy of full redemption remained a promise waiting to be poured.[50]

Then, in an upper room in Jerusalem, on the eve of His suffering, Jesus lifted a cup already present in Passover tradition but never yet fulfilled. 'This', He said, 'is my blood of the covenant.' With those words, the silence of Exodus was broken—not by noise, but by fulfilment. In the cup, Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant and completed a redemptive arc stretching from Egypt to Calvary. The wine, absent in Egypt, became the symbol not only of joy restored but of sin forgiven, wrath absorbed, and a kingdom inaugurated. It is the wine of Isaiah's banquet, the joy of the Psalms, the vineyard restored, the judgement satisfied, and the grace of God poured without measure.

This was no act of liturgical refinement or rabbinic accommodation. Jesus did not repurpose a forgotten ritual; He transformed a historical meal into an eschatological sign. The Last Supper was not merely the final Passover; it was the first Table

48 Schreiner and Crawford, *The Lord's Supper*, 145–48.

49 John H. Armstrong, ed., *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 185–87.

50 For the absence of wine in the Exodus Passover, see Exodus 12:1–20; compare the inclusion of wine in later Jewish Passover tradition in Mishnah *Pesaḥim* 10.1–7. On wine as an image of eschatological joy, see Isaiah 25:6–8.

of the New Covenant. It proclaimed not exile but exodus from sin, not plague but peace, not expectation but fulfilment.

If the church is to recover the meaning of this moment, it must return to the Table with fresh reverence and renewed imagination. The Supper is not a mystical reenactment of sacrifice, but a covenantal affirmation that the cross is enough. It is the place where the redeemed declare again, 'We are Yours.' It is where fractured souls find wholeness, divided bodies rediscover unity, weary saints are renewed, and the gathered church remembers its centre. The cup withheld in Egypt's night becomes the cup of communion in Christ's light, a sign that judgement has passed and joy has come. In drinking it, the church enters a story where lack is filled, hope is rekindled, and promise finds its yes and amen in the risen Lamb.

Yet the Supper still speaks of the not yet. Jesus said, 'I will not drink again … until that day.' A final feast is still to come, when the Bridegroom lifts the cup anew and death is swallowed in victory. Until then, we drink in remembrance, proclamation, and longing. The wine on our lips is the memory of Golgotha and the whisper of Zion.

The cup He redefined is the cup we now hold. And in every generation, when the church lifts it, we recall the Lamb who was slain. The covenant stands. The King will come. And until He drinks it again with us in the kingdom, we drink together with faith in His promise, trembling at His holiness, and joy in His unshakable victory.

ERT (2025) 49:2, 129–140

A Philosopher's Reflections on Faith Deconstruction: A Review Essay on Two Recent Books

Elmer John Thiessen

'You might say that deconstruction is now being wholly endorsed as a new form of piety.' So write Angela Bick and Peter Schuurman in their recent book *Blessed Are the Undone: Testimonies of the Quiet Deconstruction of Faith in Canada* (henceforth referenced as BU).[1] This assessment is confirmed in another recent book, *Walking Through Deconstruction: How To Be a Companion in a Crisis of Faith*, by Ian Harber (henceforth WD).[2]

Harber starts by indicating that 'the views on deconstruction content are through the roof' on various hashtags on TikTok (WD, 9). He reports that at the time of writing, he saw '1 billion views on #deconstruction, 85.5 million views on #deconstructiontiktok, 61.2 million views on #progressive-christianity, 17.5 million views on #deconstructionjourney, 1.1 million views on #deconstructiongrief'. While admitting that such a survey is not very scientific, he concludes that 'deconstruction is in the digital air' (WD, 9).

Both books refer to a recent major study entitled *The Great Dechurching*, which tries to explain why some 40 million Americans have left the church over the last 25 years.[3] Bick and Schuurman state that the demographic of 'no fixed faith identity' has swelled to over 34 percent of Canadians in 2021 (BU, 7). New categories like Nones, Dones, and the Undone are emerging to describe those who no longer have an affiliation with the church. Bick and Schuurman warn, 'If trends continue, the number of "Nones" will soon exceed the number of Christians in Canada' (BU, 7). Sadly, these rather grim statistics include many evangelicals who have deconstructed the faith in which they were raised (often referred to as exvangelicals).

Bick and Schuurman analyse various causes of deconstruction, based on interviews of 28 Canadians from a variety of evangelical denominations. All the interviewees were once committed evangelicals but are now deconstructing the faith they inherited (BU, 3; see also chapter 4). The authors also incorporate data from a pod-

Elmer John Thiessen (PhD, University of Waterloo) taught philosophy at Medicine Hat College in Canada for 36 years. He has published widely on the philosophy of religious education and on religious schools, along with two books on the ethics of evangelism. E-mail: ejthiessen@sympatico.ca.

1 Angela Reitsma Bick and Peter Schuurman, *Blessed Are the Undone: Testimonies of the Quiet Deconstruction of Faith in Canada* (Saskatoon, SK: New Leaf Network Press, 2024), 244.

2 Ian Harber, *Walking Through Deconstruction: How To Be a Companion in a Crisis of Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2025).

3 Jim Davis, Michael Graham and Ryan Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023).

cast by Josiah Mahon, who conducted 42 interviews of Canadians disillusioned with the church (BU, 17, 250). Bick and Schuurman stress that they are taking a 'lived religion' approach to researching faith deconstruction, telling the stories of those who are deconstructing their faith (BU, 16, 246).

Harber begins by telling his own story of deconstruction after experiences of parental abuse, being taken from his parents at a young age, losing several family members, seeing a mentor abuse his friends, combined with increasing doubts and questions about the Bible, his church and his faith. It took him nearly a decade to recover his faith, with help from a church 'where my questions were accepted, the Bible was opened, the riches of church history were taught, and genuine discipleship was modeled' (WD, 7). Harber tells other stories of deconstruction too, but he tries to avoid the all-too-common approach of angry evangelicals who have written 'their tell-all memoirs railing against the failures of the church' (WD, 8). Instead, he focusses on helping the church to come alongside those who are deconstructing the faith and on how to move from deconstruction to reconstruction.

Both books provide a rather sympathetic account of Christians who are deconstructing their faith. In this essay, I critically evaluate these two books and what they say about the Christian deconstructionist movement as a whole. I also want to deconstruct deconstructionism, which sadly has become a fashionable trend in evangelicalism. My approach will be philosophical rather than theological.[4] I address some conceptual confusions inherent in deconstruction. I also critique some philosophical assumptions underlying the decontructionist movement.

Difficulties in defining deconstruction

Both books admit that it is difficult to define 'deconstruction', with some scholars suggesting the term is therefore useless (BU, 12; WD, 18). At the very least, the concept is confusing because it is applied to very different phenomena. Bick and Schuurman offer a veritable catalogue of reasons for Christian deconstruction: a fundamentalist church mindset, hurt from sexual abuse, church leaders abusing their power, disagreement with a conservative stance regarding LGBTQ issues, a rejection of purity culture, and a reaction to Christian nationalism. I believe greater clarity can be achieved if we distinguish between these very different reasons for deconstruction and deal with each one individually or in related groups.[5]

Harber suggests that deconstruction is best understood as a 'crisis of faith' (WD, 30–32). It is not to be confused with backsliding or having questions and doubts about the particulars of one's faith. Harber offers a formal definition, 'Deconstruction is a crisis of faith that leads to the questioning of core doctrines and untangling of cultural ideologies that settles in a faith that is different from before' (WD, 25), along with an informal analogy to 'hitting the wall'.

4 For an overview of critiques of deconstruction, see Bick and Schuurman, *Blessed Are the Undone*, 247–49.

5 Although Bick and Schuurman devote a chapter to each of these reasons for deconstruction, they fail to do justice to the differences in how one responds to these various reasons. I find more effective responses in Catherine McNiel and Jason Hague, *Mid-Faith Crisis: Finding a Path Through Doubt, Disillusionment, and Dead Ends* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2025).

Bick and Schuurman also describe deconstruction in terms of personal crisis. 'Our definition of deconstruction is 'faith undone'—having your conservative or evangelical affiliation with God, the Bible, and the Christian faith fall apart, usually prompted by failures of the Church, while simultaneously being emotionally and spiritually distanced from a taken-for-granted religious family, community, and tradition' (BU, 7). An interviewee named Michael, age 61, describes deconstruction as happening when the 'happy little bubble pops', such as the bubble 'that says Jesus makes everything perfect or whatever' (BU, 7).

Significantly, both definitions seem to start with outside forces as the cause of a crisis of faith. Harber argues explicitly that deconstruction is not something that you choose—it just 'happens *to* you' (WD, 23–24).

Clearly, some causes fit this description, such as experiences of personal abuse. But even amidst such trauma, we can still choose how to respond. Indeed, there is always an element of choice in Christian deconstruction, as in all behaviour, although it can be concealed by the ways in which society shapes us. We live in a society saturated with attitudes of criticism, scepticism and suspicion of tradition, and Christians are not immune to these negative and destructive influences. Indeed, the current fad of deconstruction is largely shaped by this social atmosphere. But we are not puppets who simply succumb to the social forces around us. The Bible teaches that we can make choices and are morally responsible for the choices we make (Gen 2:16–17; Josh 1:1–9; 24:15; Ezek 18).

The Bible also repeatedly exhorts us not to go along with the world around us. Jesus calls us to be the light of the world, and he condemns those who love darkness rather than light (Mt 5:14; Jn 3:19). Paul urges us to 'not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds' (Rom 12:2). John challenges us not to believe the spirit of the age, 'but test the spirits to see whether they are from God' (1 Jn 4:1). These are commands that we are called to obey. So it is a mistake to define deconstruction as something that simply happens to us. There is always some choice involved in deconstruction.

Bick and Schuurman allude to another possible source of confusion that we must avoid when defining deconstruction. They write, 'It is our firm conviction that some sort of deconstruction is normal of growth—whether it takes the shape of falling away, repentance, or the quiet reconstruction that we call sanctification' (BU, 33; cf. 97, 157). Note the vague reference to 'some sort of deconstruction'. The authors seem to recognize that it is inappropriate to use the very negative notion of deconstruction when talking about normal Christian growth. It is even more inappropriate to link deconstruction with repentance, and then to associate reconstruction with sanctification. We need to be careful not to trade on the positive meanings of theological concepts as a way to justify deconstruction which has strongly pejorative overtones. While I agree that we can talk about Christian growth in terms of deconstruction and reconstruction, I believe it is safer not to do so. Better to use the biblical language of 'growing in the knowledge of God' (Col 1:10).

Healthy versus unhealthy deconstruction

Both books try to give Christian deconstruction a positive spin. Bick and Schuurman's title refers to the 'undone' as 'blessed'. They repeatedly describe deconstruc-

tion as 'healthy' (BU, 47, 195, 206, 225). Both books also link deconstruction with the positive notion of reconstruction. Harber begins with his own story of deconstructing and then reconstructing his faith. He compares deconstruction to the grieving process and suggests that the final acceptance stage includes 'replacing our faith, remixing it, or renewing it' (WD, 52). Bick and Schuurman similarly link deconstruction with reconstruction (BU, 3, 80–82, 184, 201).

I have a problem with this overall approach of trying to put a positive spin on deconstruction, because it does not always lead to reconstruction. Many who deconstruct their evangelical faith never return. Harber lists a number of popular deconstructionists who aren't Christians anymore (WD, 17). He describes the early Emergent Church, the precursor to deconstructionism, and adds that 'many (not all) of the names associated with the Emergent movement have either left the faith altogether or redefined it in ways that are beyond recognition' (WD, 19).

This point is reinforced when we look more closely at Harber's comparison of deconstruction to the grieving process and his suggestion that the final acceptance stage includes 'replacing our faith, remixing it, or renewing it' (WD p. 52; cf. 96–101). Only the last of this trilogy of effects includes reconstruction. Replacing faith would be better described as rejecting the faith. And remixing faith, a growing phenomenon in our day according to Tara Burton, surely should not be read as a positive form of reconstructing the faith.[6]

Bick and Schuurman also admit that some of the people deconstructing their faith 'have deconverted as a result' (BU, 204). Their repeated qualification of deconstruction as 'healthy' suggests that there is also an unhealthy deconstruction. But the distinction between healthy and unhealthy deconstruction cries out for clarification. At one point Bick and Schuurman do in fact describe the nature of healthy deconstruction. 'Good deconstruction burns off the dross and keeps the gold of Christian doctrine and practice' (BU, 225; see WD, 23). But this begs the question as to what is dross and what is gold. It also assumes that deconstruction is concerned about keeping the gold. But most deconstruction is all about dismantling, demolition, tearing down, and unbuilding. (BU, 12, 55, 57, 234; WD 23). It is simply misleading to give it a positive meaning by combining it with reconstruction or by prefixing it with the word 'healthy'.

While I worry about too quick an association of deconstruction with reconstruction, there is still some legitimacy to making this link. Some deconstructionists sincerely want to critically examine the practices and beliefs of the evangelical church in the hope of bringing it closer to what Jesus intended for the church.[7] Some people who experience a deconstruction of their faith, like Harber, do move on to reconstruction. Bick and Schuurman point out that for some, 'this deconstructive journey is a deeply theological exercise that draws them closer to Jesus, even to the more ancient Christian traditions' (BU, 248). At one point they object to 'complete demo-

6 Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2022, rpt. ed.).

7 For example, Brian McLaren's initial intention in deconstructing our popular Christian concept of hell was to 'get to an even better understanding of God's justice' and God's grace (BU, 244). James K. A. Smith similarly defines deconstruction as 'a deeply affirmative mode of critique … with a view to reconstructing and reconstituting institutions and practices to be more just' (BU, 13).

lition' and argue instead for 'healthy dismantling' (BU, 225). In doing so, they acknowledge that healthy reconstruction does not always happen: 'We know a sweet return to the Church is not guaranteed' (BU, 248). These qualifications suggest that there might just be something wrong with the starting point of deconstruction itself. More on this later.

Deconstruction because of personal hurts

Whereas treatments of deconstruction tend to lump together all kinds of experiences that relate to the unravelling of faith, it is essential to distinguish between different reasons for deconstruction. I will examine several of the main cited causes individually.

One common reason for deconstruction is the personal hurt people have experienced within the church. Harber begins his book with a description of some very difficult experiences as a child and adolescent which led to the deconstruction of his faith. Many of the people interviewed by Bick and Schuurman gave as their reason for deconstruction experiences of personal trauma. Some individuals were hurt by leaders in the church who abused their power, while others experienced the trauma of sexual abuse by pastors in their churches (BU, chapter 14). Bick and Schuurman devote a chapter to 'fallen giants' while Harber provides a list of the same, adding that it keeps growing (WD, 72). When church leaders fall, people experience the pain of disillusionment.

Many people also have been rejected and expelled by the church due to issues of sexuality. Four of Bick and Schuurman's interviewees and another 12 in Mahon's podcasts identified as LGBTQ+ (BU, 16). More than half of the people interviewed cited Christian treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals as 'a catalyst for deconstruction' (BU, 142).

One can certainly understand why Christians who have experienced deep personal hurt in the church would spend some time deconstructing their faith and even giving up on faith entirely. These sad stories deserve our empathy, and we should not minimize or ignore the pain they have experienced (BU, 248). It is these individuals who are most appropriately called 'blessed', as suggested in the title of Bick and Schuurman's book and as described in Jesus' beatitudes (BU, xviii). But even here, we need to be careful. Deconstruction due to personal pain is not inevitable. I have had painful experiences in the church as well, but this has not led me to deconstruct my faith. Instead, I needed time for healing. I have had to remind myself that the church isn't perfect, and yet Christ loves the church. Therefore, I have hung in there.

Harber is most effective in addressing the cases of deconstruction that are due to personal hurt and disillusionment with the church. Hence the subtitle of his book: 'How to be a Companion in a Crisis of Faith'. In part two of his book, he provides suggestions for ministering to the pain experienced by deconstructionists or, better still, mitigating the need for deconstruction in the first place. For example, in chapter 8 he focusses on creating healthy relationships with individuals who are deconstructing their faith. The church needs to be 'a non-anxious presence' for such people, which includes prayer, patience, persistence, curiosity, and care. It is also important to paint a realistic picture of what the Christian life entails, including suffering and doubt (chapters 9 and 10). I believe it is these cases of personal hurt that carry the

weight of the sympathetic accounts of deconstruction found in both books. The authors are at their best in pleading for understanding of the 'undone'. Clearly, some deconstruction might be appropriate and perhaps necessary in cases where Christians have been deeply hurt by the church. But we must be very careful not to let these more obvious examples of legitimate deconstruction colour our response to all the other cases. Instances of personal trauma do not justify all types of deconstruction, as Bick and Schuurman seem to assume (BU, 236). We need to examine each case on its own merits.

Deconstruction as a reaction to conservative beliefs

Another frequently recurring reason for deconstruction has to do with a conservative or even a fundamentalist theological mindset in churches. Bick and Schuurman discuss allegedly narrow attitudes towards the Bible, with one person suggesting that 'we rely way too much on the Bible' (BU, 75; see chapter 9). Certain passages are viewed with suspicion because they are seen as 'patriarchal, genocidal, homophobic, violent, and exclusive' (BU, 76). Other deconstructionists complain about a perceived incompatibility of Scripture and science, particularly with regard to evolution (BU, chapter 10). Still others worry about claims to 'exclusive truth that required conformity of thought' (BU, 28). Some object to so-called black-and-white thinking (BU, 29–30, 85). Christian nationalism is another cause for concern (BU, chapter 16). Of course, theological debates about LGBTQ+ legitimacy are dividing churches and denominations and leading deconstructionists to forsake their conservative heritage altogether. Finally, Harber identifies the doctrine of hell as one of the first doctrines to be questioned by many people who are deconstructing their faith (WD, 63) Brian McLaren and Rob Bell are obvious examples of this kind of deconstruction (BU, 243–44).

These reactions to conservative theological stance share a basic problem: they assume, without proving it, that the conservative position is wrong. For example, Bick and Schuurman describe deconstructionists as recovering from a 'broken theology' or 'plain bad teaching' (BU, 226, 248). But who decides what is broken theology or bad teaching? I share their frustration with people who insist that creation occurred in six 24-hour days or who promote Christian nationalism, but other examples are not so obvious. Is it wrong to treat the Bible as authoritative or to read some of its passages literally? Should we jettison centuries of shared understanding on marriage and sexuality because a modern movement is advocating for same-sex marriage? What is wrong with making exclusive truth claims? (After all, LGBTQ+ advocates make exclusive truth claims too!) These are complex issues that can't be dismissed as obvious examples of bad theology.

And we must be careful not to exaggerate the seriousness of some of this 'bad' theology. There is after all something right about relying on the Bible to address today's problems. If the Bible is not authoritative, what is? There is also something right about the 'purity culture' of the church in the 1990s, as Bick and Schuurman admit while treating this as another example of a broken theology (BU, chapter 13). There is a further assumption made by Bick and Schuurman and other deconstructionists that a liberal and progressive expression of Christian faith is to be preferred over evangelical Christianity. Indeed, the 'undone' often move to liberal churches

(BU, 165, 171). Bick and Schuurman themselves seem sympathetic to liberal theology and mainline churches. Bick describes herself as not 'deeply invested' in the historicity of Jesus (BU, 68), and Schuurman confesses that his 'identification with things evangelical has thinned over the last 15 years' (BU, 72). The authors frequently refer positively to causes closely associated with liberal churches, such as environmental justice and indigenous religion, and they seem to exempt liberal and progressive Christians from the need for deconstruction (BU, 28).

But this positive alignment with liberal theology and liberal causes requires justification, which is not a simple thing to provide. Being progressive is not necessarily good, as the prophets often had to remind the people of Israel. The new is not necessarily better than the old, a mistake that Brian McLaren keeps making when he inserts the word 'new' in his book titles (BU, 14, 243–44). A critical study of liberal churches will find much that needs deconstructing there as well. Dogmatism, narrowness, and black-and-white thinking exist there too, just about different issues.

It is all too easy for former evangelicals who have moved on to a more liberal expression of their faith to see themselves as somehow enlightened. There is a desperate need for intellectual humility here.[8]

Deconstruction as a reaction to a conservative upbringing

It is one thing to deconstruct the theology that we have inherited; it is quite another thing to react to the *way* in which this theology was conveyed or reinforced, especially as children. Many of Bick and Schuurman's interviewees object to the church's demand for certainty and its refusal to entertain thoughtful questions (BU, 86, 89, 232; see also WD, 139–40). One respondent complained about growing up in a charismatic denomination which 'interpreted Scripture literally', allowing for only one interpretation, which was viewed as the 'right' one (BU, 29). Several people interviewed used the phrase 'black-and-white thinking' to describe the churches they were raised in (BU, 29–30, 85). Reflecting on their experiences as teenagers at a Christian summer camp, Hannah and Josiah Mahon describe themselves as 'hardcore little Christian robots' (BU, 109). Another interviewee used the term 'indoctrination' to describe her upbringing (BU, 179).

I want to focus on indoctrination as a way of summarizing the above reasons for deconstruction. 'Indoctrination' is typically understood as a pejorative term. But it is misleading to label a conservative upbringing in this way. Complaints about supposed indoctrination often boil down to 'I strongly object to the way in which I was brought up.'[9] Yes, children absorb what they are taught rather uncritically. They are trusting by nature, and there is nothing wrong with this. Yes, it is adults who 'initiate' children into particular ways of thinking and believing. And again, there is nothing wrong with this. All children, including children brought up in liberal homes and churches, are brought up within a primary culture that might look somewhat narrow

8 See Elmer Thiessen, *Healthy Christian Minds: A Biblical, Practical, and Sometimes Philosophical Exploration of Intellectual Virtues and Vices* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024), chapter 3.

9 See Elmer Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (Montreal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press; Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 1993).

after a child has grown up. So caution is in order when labelling one's upbringing as indoctrinatory.

This does not mean that the charge of indoctrination is never justified. But it should be applied only to those cases where parents fail to encourage their maturing children to become independent or autonomous thinkers (though these terms need some qualification, as we are never completely independent or autonomous). I agree that indoctrination sometimes occurs in conservative households and churches, but the extent of this failure tends to be exaggerated. The vast majority of parents want their children to mature into adults who claim their faith for themselves, and most evangelical churches welcome honest questions raised by young people. So this reason for deconstruction is most often problematic in my opinion.

There is a desperate need for the church to think more carefully about how adult faith relates to a childhood faith. 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned as a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways', Paul says (1 Cor 13:11). When children reach adulthood, they should deconstruct more childish ways of thinking and move on to more sophisticated ways, much as the author of Hebrews calls on believers to move on to 'solid food' (Heb 5:12). But this is no reason to look down on one's earlier way of thinking or disparage one's upbringing. Instead, we need to look at our childhood faith as something that provided a foundation upon which we have built. A narrow religious upbringing can and should be seen as an asset rather than a liability.

This is illustrated in one essay from a book in which eleven philosophers reflect on their conservative religious upbringings.[10] Nearly all of them give a very negative account of their upbringing, with several accusing their parents of indoctrinating them. There is, however, one notable exception. Raymond Bradley, despite his objections to growing up in a fundamentalist Christian environment, said it 'gave me something tough to chew on, something to cut my teeth on intellectually'.[11] Yes, indeed! Our childhood faith should not simply be deconstructed but built on and revised as needed. Except in cases of serious abuse, we should not see our upbringing as something we need to recover from (BU, 248). Rather, it should be seen in a positive light, as providing the foundation for further growth.

The history of deconstruction and its negative overtones

For me, the fundamental problem with deconstruction is its negative overtones. We can best see this by looking at the history of the concept.[12] The notion of deconstruction has its origins in Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher and postmodernist. Although the conversation about deconstruction started in philosophical and literary circles, it had social and political roots. The aim was to break the structures of power by subverting the structure of language, always looking for contradictions within a text (BU, 12–13). There are clearly strongly negative connotations to this notion.

10 Peter Caws and Stefani Jones, eds., *Religious Upbringing and the Costs of Freedom: Personal and Philosophical Essays* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

11 Raymond D. Bradley, 'From Fundamentalist to Freethinker (It All Began with Santa)', in Caws and Jones, *Religious Upbringing and the Costs of Freedom,* 50.

12 See BU, chapter 2; WD; 18–19. Bick and Schuurman provide an excellent overview of the history of deconstruction and its influence in evangelicalism in their literature review (pp. 243–49).

Christian deconstruction carries this same negative connotation, though Bick and Schuurman try to gloss over this point when they repeatedly connect deconstruction with reconstruction, drawing on James K. A. Smith who interprets Derrida as having a positive aim in his own deconstruction project (BU, 13). I have raised concerns elsewhere about Smith's view of Derrida.[13] Harber fails in a similar way when he defines deconstruction as 'a crisis of faith' which finally 'settles in a faith', though one 'that is different from before' (WD, 25). Harber suggests that only in the last 30 years have Christians used the concept of deconstruction 'to describe the process of re-examining their faith to reveal the contradictions in it and produce something better' (WD, 18–19). This became the hallmark of what would eventually be called the Emergent Church.

But as I have already argued, we need to separate deconstruction from reconstruction and focus on the former in its own right. Notice the negative orientation of Bick and Schuurman's description of deconstruction. For them, the aim of re-examining one's faith is 'to reveal the contradictions in it'. They go on to suggest that deconstruction can be summarized in the phrase 'question everything' (BU, 63). They devote a chapter to the book of Ecclesiastes, 'a progenitor of deconstruction' in its penchant for doubt, questioning, and tearing down.

Deconstruction is at its core a negative project, committed to questioning, tearing down, and destroying. We see this exemplified today in attempts to deconstruct or destroy traditions, institutions, or anything that is established and has stood the test of time. Of course, this raises the question as to whether deconstruction is a good thing.

A critique of the social constructivism underlying deconstruction

Another easily overlooked dimension of deconstruction is its assumption of social constructivism. Bick and Schuurman stress the human origins of evangelicalism, and hence its temporality and thus also the need for it to be 'chastened' or deconstructed (BU, 8, 70). They refer to D. G. Hart's 2004 book *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*, in which he argued that 'evangelicalism is a social construct and thus it can be deconstructed' (BU, 243). They also reference Brian McLaren, one of the first evangelicals to write about unravelling his personal faith in his autobiographical trilogy, published in the early 2000s. McLaren has one of his characters justify deconstructing the notion of hell. 'If it is an idea that arises in human history, then it's constructed by humans, and if humans constructed it, then humans can deconstruct it' (BU, 244).

Social constructivism is the dominant school of thought in the social sciences today. But social constructivism is itself in need of deconstruction. Indeed, the notion is self-defeating. If social constructivism itself is merely a human construction, then it too should be seen as a temporal blip in the history of ideas. Human thinking cannot simply be reduced to a human endeavour. All serious thinking is an effort to

13 See Elmer John Thiessen, review of James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), in *Evangelical Quarterly*, 83. no. 4 (2011): 347–51.

describe objective realities, the way things really are. And those objective realities place constraints on human thought. So yes, evangelicalism is in part a human construction, but it is also an attempt to capture what God has revealed about himself. The Bible is not just a social construction, as many deconstructionists assume.

It is, of course, legitimate to ask whether evangelical theology is better at capturing God's revelation than other theologies. But it is foolish to propose that it must be deconstructed or dismantled or relativized because it is simply a human construction.

A critique of the hypercriticism underlying deconstruction

There is a fundamental epistemological problem with deconstructionism, and I prefer to trace it back to Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, who in his *Meditations* of 1641 tried to doubt all his beliefs as a way to find a solid foundation for knowledge. After doing so, he thought he had found certainty in his famous declaration, 'I think, therefore I am.' Unfortunately, even this foundational certainty isn't quite as certain as Descartes assumed, as it is based on a number of unquestioned assumptions.

More concerning is Descartes' approach of methodological doubt, the precursor to deconstruction. It is simply impossible to doubt everything. Further, doubt is parasitic on belief, as Wittgenstein taught us.[14] We learn by first inheriting a system of beliefs and values, and only after being initiated into such a system can we begin to raise questions about it. You can only deconstruct if you have first been given something to deconstruct, and it behooves us to treat what we have inherited with a good deal of respect. Indeed, we can never entirely erase the belief system that we inherited. You simply cannot start from scratch, as Descartes and deconstructionists assume.

Sadly, Descartes is still very much with us today. We see this in the emphasis on critical thinking in education, in the scepticism that pervades so much of our thinking, in the general negativity of our culture, and in the critical theologies that approach the Bible with an intentional hermeneutic of suspicion.[15] We see this in the church, where too often the old is vilified and anything new is considered better than the old. Harber highlights 'the valorization of doubt' as one of the first principles of deconstruction (WD, 54).

Most of the chapters of *Blessed Are the Undone* highlight the failures of the evangelical church and 'what is broken in our churches' (BU, 204; see also 29, 182, 212, 224, 226). 'Evangelicalism is in crisis and its institutions need reformation', the authors argue (BU, 231). In moments of personal transparency, they give voice to this negative tone. Schuurman admits that his mind 'turned a corner' during the scandal surrounding Canadian megapastor Bruxy Cavey. He now finds himself focussing on the 'brokenness' of the church, and 'this book is a testament to such pain' (BU, 72).

I concede that the evangelical church is not perfect, but I do have concerns about the largely negative description of evangelicalism. Bick and Schuurman acknowl-

14 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), para. 115.

15 See my blog post 'The Bible and a Hermeneutics of Suspicion' (2017), https://elmerjohnthiessen.wordpress.com/?p=914.

edge the danger of focussing only on the negative (BU, 235). But in that case, they should have given us a more balanced evaluation of the evangelical church. The theological core of evangelicalism remains solid, capturing the doctrines and traditions the orthodox church has sustained over the centuries. The Bible exhorts us repeatedly to 'hold on' to the traditions of the past (Jer 6:16; 1 Cor 11:2; Phil 2:16; 1 Thess 5:21; 2 Thess 2:15; Rev. 2:25). To suggest that the evangelical church is in need of a Luther-like reformation is far-fetched and rests on a hypercritical attitude that characterizes most deconstructionists (BU, 211). As I have argued elsewhere, hypercriticism is an intellectual vice that calls for repentance.[16]

Lest I be misunderstood, I want to remind the reader that I believe there is a place for critical thinking and honest doubt, and even for healthy deconstruction. As a professional philosopher, I have a good deal of respect for rigorous critique and argument. I also grant the appropriateness of using the word 'deconstruction' to describe the process of distancing oneself from problematic theological positions held by evangelical (or liberal) churches. However, some forms of deconstruction have gone off the rails into extreme hypercriticism. We must reject worship of the idol of newness, as though the new is always better and more enlightened than the old. C. S. Lewis coined the phrase 'chronological snobbery' to describe this phenomenon. Healthy criticism is humbler, knows its limits, and recognizes the positive features of one's faith tradition or upbringing.

So how should we relate to the preoccupation with deconstruction in the evangelical church today? I commend Harber, Bick and Schuurman for trying to help those who are struggling with aspects of their evangelical heritage. I endorse Harber's call for the church to create a positive, welcoming environment for such people and their questions. But our engagement should recognize the philosophical underpinnings of deconstruction, which are themselves in desperate need of vigorous critique. The evangelical church needs to get its epistemology right, and only then will we be able to help those who are deconstructing their faith. Such help must include warnings about becoming captive to the deconstructive spirit of the age in which we now live.

A concluding suggestion

Austrian philosopher Otto Neurath (1882–1945) provides a useful analogy to illustrate the wisdom needed in re-evaluating and revising our beliefs.[17] He compares this process to rebuilding or doing repairs on a ship while at sea. It would obviously be disastrous to take the ship apart entirely while at sea in order to rebuild or do a repair on it. Instead, we keep the ship afloat, repairing it part by part. Similarly, a person's or a church's belief system should be critically assessed only part by part, because you have to go on living with the beliefs you have as you do this gradual rebuilding and repairing. Too much of an emphasis on deconstruction, criticism, and doubt leads to the sinking of our epistemological and ecclesiastical ships. This analogy also

16 Thiessen, *Healthy Christian Minds*, chapter 4.

17 Neurath's shipbuilding analogy is cited in Lawrence Haworth, *Autonomy: An Essay in Philosophical Psychology and Ethics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 4.

underscores the fact that revising our beliefs always takes place within a certain tradition, which should be cherished as something we can build on and improve.

May God help all of us to be faithful in revising our Christian convictions and rebuilding them one by one so as to be more in accord with the truth as revealed in God's word and in Jesus Christ.

ERT (2025) 49:2, 141–150

An Evangelical Theology of Technology Stewardship

Aristo Purboadji

Introduction: Evangelicals and technology

From pastor Thomas Prince's condemnation of the lightning rod in 1755, as a defiant challenge to God's sovereignty, to modern fears of microchips as tools of the Antichrist and barcodes as the 'mark of the beast' (666), theological opposition to technological innovation has echoed across centuries. In the 1920s and 1930s, evangelicals were divided over the advent of radio; some denounced it as a profane intrusion upon the sacred pulpit, while others welcomed it as a new platform to spread the gospel and win souls.[1]

As we move into an era of incredible technological advancements and innovation, particularly in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI), evangelical Christians need a robust theology of technological innovation. After all, the world's leading power in economics, military strength, and technological innovation—the United States—is also the global stronghold of evangelicalism.[2] This providential alignment should not be squandered, especially as we enter a new era of great power competetion.

In recent years, an encouraging trend has emerged: Christians are becoming increasingly engaged in the world of technology, particularly in its global hotbed, the Silicon Valley region of California. Peter Thiel, one of the tech world's most influential figures, boldly declared, 'Science and technology are natural allies to this Judeo-Western optimism.'[3] Reflecting this vision, a group of Silicon Valley luminaries founded ACTS 17—short for 'Acknowledging Christ in Technology and Society'—an organization dedicated to inspiring society's most influential leaders to place Christ at the centre of their work and lives. At one of ACTS 17's events, Trae Stephens, co-founder of the defence technology company Anduril, emphasized that

Aristo Purboadji (PhD, Institut Pertanian Bogor, Indonesia) is the head of Tiberias Theological School in Jakarta and an associate pastor at Gereja Tiberias Indonesia. He has published articles on issues of theology and human rights, as well as *Democratic Deterrence of Middle Powers in Great Power Rivalry: The Case for Indonesia* (F1000Research, 2025). Email: aristo.pariadji@tiberias.or.id.

1 T. J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

2 Philip Jenkins has persuasively shown that the demographic centre of Christianity has shifted to the Majority World. See Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). My use of 'global stronghold' for the United States refers less to demographics and more to its unique combination of institutional influence, financial resources and technological leadership that amplifies evangelical reach worldwide.

3 Peter Thiel, 'Against Edenism', *First Things*, 1 June 2015.

vocations outside the church can be sacred, quoting Martin Luther's teaching that even seemingly secular professions can be holy callings when done in service to God.[4]

Christianity Today has also drawn attention to Thiel's evangelical commitments, noting how he has spoken openly about forgiveness, miracles and the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection at ACTS 17 gatherings. Attendees remarked on the intellectual seriousness of his faith, with some surprised to discover the depth of his Christian convictions.[5] Such accounts suggest that conversations at the highest levels of technology are already being infused with explicitly evangelical reflection, hinting at new possibilities for witness and cultural influence.

Both the Lausanne Movement's Seoul Statement and its State of the Great Commission Report highlight technology's growing role in evangelism and discipleship, encouraging the church to approach new developments with discernment and care.[6] Building on this helpful foundation, the church should also seek opportunities to contribute positively to the shaping of technology itself, so that innovation becomes one more way of serving God's mission and the common good.

Thiel's article 'Against Edenism' frames technology as a theological mandate, not merely a tool. He rejects the notion of returning to Eden, arguing instead that Christians are called to participate in building the 'City of God', where technology becomes a means of subduing chaos and extending human flourishing under divine providence. This is a theological vision of dominion, not retreat—a Judeo-Christian technological optimism that contrasts sharply with secular postmodern dystopias.

Movements like ACTS 17 in Silicon Valley exemplify this proactive theology of technology. Founders like Trae Stephens are not content with Christians merely navigating the tech world; they call for a redefinition of 'success' where creating technology becomes an act of worship, a 'good quest' aligned with God's command to bring His kingdom 'on earth as it is in heaven'. This is not technocracy baptized; it is a new theology of technological vocation, where innovation is a form of discipleship and creation itself becomes a witness to the Creator.

Thus, it is imperative that church and evangelical leaders do not lag behind this emerging movement. To warn that technology can transform humanity without also affirming that Christians are called to shape that transformation is to abdicate a divine mandate. Made in the Creator's image, we are not mere stewards of tools crafted by others; we are to be the inventors, the frontier-builders, the culture-makers. A theology of mere adaptation is insufficient. We need a theology of technological stewardship—one that sees innovation not as a secular sphere to adapt to but as a sacred calling to lead.

---

4 Lauren Goode, 'The Silicon Valley Christians Who Want to Build "Heaven on Earth"', *Wired*, 14 March 2025.

5 Kate Lucky, 'Wouldn't It Be Funny if We Tricked a Bunch of People into Going to Church?' *Christianity Today*, 11 August 2025, https://christianitytoday.com/?p=353765.

6 These documents were prepared for the fourth world congress of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelisation at Seoul-Incheon, Korea in September 2024. The Seoul Statement: https://lausanne.org/?p=1253840; State of the Great Commission Report: https://lausanne.org/report.

Historical and theological foundations

There are two foundational pillars upon which an evangelical theology of technology stewardship can be built: the historical argument and the theological argument.

The historical argument

The historical argument asserts that the mastery of technology is not a novel aspiration but a continuation of a trajectory deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian civilization. From the medieval monasteries' technological ingenuity to the Protestant ethic's catalytic role in modern scientific and industrial revolutions, history bears witness that technological advancement has flourished most vibrantly where the Christian worldview has shaped culture.

Building upon this historical trajectory, we must now confront the explosive implications of our present technological moment. For most of human history, global gross domestic product (GDP) growth was negligible, stagnating at an average of merely 0.1 percent per year for over a millennium. Then came the Industrial Revolution, a pivotal inflection point that propelled growth rates to 0.5 percent, 1.9 percent, and eventually 2.8 percent per annum by the time of the 20th century.[7] The fusion of technological innovation with cultural institutions—rooted deeply in Judeo-Christian civilization—ignited a self-reinforcing loop of economic and societal transformation.

Yet, if the evangelists of Silicon Valley are to be believed, this historical arc is poised for another exponential leap. *The Economist* forecasts that AI's capacity to automate knowledge work and accelerate idea generation will soon elevate annual GDP growth rates to an astounding 20–30 percent—a rate previously unimaginable yet now within the realm of mathematical inevitability.[8] This is not hyperbole; it's the relentless logic of recursive self-improvement. As AI systems begin generating novel scientific insights and overseeing their own enhancement, the economic feedback loops will be detached from demographic constraints, unlike the slow and organic population-fuelled growth of the past.

Where, then, have these technological revolutions consistently germinated? Almost invariably in societies shaped by the Judeo-Christian worldview. Joseph Henrich, in *The WEIRDest People in the World*, meticulously documents how the Catholic Church's medieval marriage and kinship policies—particularly the enforcement of monogamy—disintegrated the dense, tribal kin networks that constrained innovation.[9] This ecclesiastical intervention cultivated a society primed for individualism, impersonal trust, and abstract rule-based reasoning. Protestantism later delivered a cultural 'booster shot', further amplifying individual agency, literacy, and a moral ethos that valued industriousness and fairness towards strangers.

Henrich coined the acronym WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) to describe this historically unique psychological profile that underpins the modern economic order. Crucially, the Industrial Revolution first erupted in

7 'Eureka All Day Long,' *The Economist*, 26 July 2025, 17–19.

8 'The Economics of Superintelligence', *The Economist*, 26 July 2025, 7–8.

9 Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

these predominantly Protestant societies, whose cultural DNA had been rewired by centuries of church-induced shifts in kinship, trust and cognitive orientation.

Therefore, the accelerating technological mastery we witness today—particularly in AI—is not a break from the past but the culmination of a civilizational trajectory seeded by a distinct theological anthropology. An evangelical theology of technology stewardship must recognize that technological innovation flourishes where culture has been recalibrated by the Christian vision of human nature—a vision that emphasizes individual agency, stewardship and a calling to shape creation itself.

This unique cultural environment, shaped by Protestant theology, produced key figures who embodied this new synthesis of faith and innovation. For instance, the spark which ignited the Industrial Revolution—the steam engine—did not originate with James Watt, as is commonly believed, but with a devout Baptist lay preacher named Thomas Newcomen. While Watt later refined the design, it was Newcomen's atmospheric engine in the early 18th century that first harnessed steam power to drive machinery, forever altering the trajectory of industrial society. This is not a trivial footnote of history; it is emblematic of how technological ingenuity was born out of the spiritual convictions of a man who saw no dissonance between his faith and mechanical innovation.[10]

Max Weber, in his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, argued that Protestant theology—particularly the doctrines of vocation and stewardship—cultivated a culture of disciplined labour, frugality and a relentless pursuit of excellence. For Weber, it was not mere economic opportunism but a theological anthropology that transformed work into a sacred calling, thus laying the psychological and cultural foundation for the industrial and scientific revolutions.

However, we must distinguish carefully between *Protestant theology* as a broad historical tradition and *evangelical theology* as one of its renewal movements. Protestantism, in its Reformation origins, sanctified vocation, emphasized the priesthood of all believers, and produced cultural patterns that encouraged literacy, industriousness and trust beyond kinship. These developments, as Weber noted, helped unleash the economic and technological dynamism of the modern West. Yet Protestantism's historical influence was not unambiguous. Nominally Protestant empires also became agents of colonial expansion, dividing the world into 'the West and the rest' and often justifying domination in religious terms. Thus, alongside its redemptive contributions to human flourishing, Protestantism also bore idolatrous and sinful dimensions, especially when it fused theology with the pursuit of power.

By contrast, evangelical theology inherits Protestant convictions about vocation and stewardship but orients them explicitly towards the Great Commission and the global advance of the gospel. Whereas Protestantism in its cultural form has at times been co-opted by empire and technocracy, evangelical theology insists on discerning how vocation and innovation serve Christ's lordship and the redemption of all creation.

Recent developments in Silicon Valley illustrate why this distinction matters. A 2025 *Vanity Fair* report observed that 'there are people that are leveraging Christi-

10 L. Rolt and J. Allen, *The Steam Engine of Thomas Newcomen* (Hartington, UK: Moorland, 1977).

anity to get closer to Peter Thiel.'[11] In such cases, faith risks becoming instrumentalized as a form of social access or professional advantage rather than lived out as one's theological conviction. This is a reminder that every culture bears not only the *imago Dei* but also the marks of the Fall, which can distort vocation into idolatry and stewardship into domination. Evangelical theology cannot afford to confuse this kind of cultural Christianity with authentic discipleship. To affirm technology as vocation is not to baptize Western hegemony, nor to sanctify the use of Christianity as a badge of influence. Rather, it is to recover a theological vision in which innovation serves creation care, resists idolatry and bears witness to the Kingdom of God.

Yet here we must draw a crucial boundary. Evangelical theology cannot be conflated with the political program of Christian nationalism. While the latter seeks to merge faith with ethnic identity and national power, evangelical theology insists that Christ's lordship transcends every tribe, tongue and nation. History shows how easily the Protestant legacy of vocation and innovation can be co-opted into triumphalist or exclusionary metanarratives—whether in colonial empires or in contemporary movements that wrap technological and democratic achievements in the banner of cultural superiority. Figures like Doug Wilson or Pete Hegseth, and even Elon Musk's flirtations with European nationalist parties, illustrate how appeals to 'Christian civilization' can mask projects of white supremacy or cultural domination. To baptize such ideologies would be to confuse providence with providentialism and vocation with vainglory. Evangelical theology must therefore affirm technology as a vocation while simultaneously repudiating any ideology—whether nationalist, racial or imperial—that instrumentalizes faith for power. Mastery of technology must be framed not as a self-aggrandizing narrative of cultural exceptionalism but as an act of service to creation, a witness against idolatry, and a participation in the Kingdom that is not of this world.

In light of this, we must confront a probing theological question: If the most consequential technological breakthroughs in human history—those that reshaped the face of the world—emerged from within societies profoundly shaped by Protestant Christianity, could this be more than historical coincidence? Might it reflect a providential pattern in which God, in His sovereignty, has entrusted the stewardship of technological mastery to His people?

This is not to claim technological dominion as a triumphalist boast, but to recognize that the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 to 'subdue the earth' includes a responsibility not only to cultivate but to create, innovate and govern the tools of civilization. It suggests that the historical unfolding of technological progress within Judeo-Christian contexts is a manifestation of divine providence—a calling for believers to be at the frontier of human creativity, shaping technology not as passive adopters but as active stewards under the Lordship of Christ.

This providential pattern is not limited to technology alone. Furthermore, political scientists have long observed that the societies quickest to embrace democracy were predominantly Protestant. This pattern is deeply rooted in the theological anthropology and cultural architecture shaped by the Reformation. In my *Theological*

11 Zoë Bernard, 'Christianity Was "Borderline Illegal" in Silicon Valley. Now It's the New Religion', *Vanity Fair*, 20 March 2025, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/story/christianity-was-borderline-illegal-in-silicon-valley-now-its-the-new-religion.

Defense for Human Rights in Indonesia, I argued that the political culture most conducive to democratic consolidation is a human-rights culture—one that historically has found fertile ground in Protestant societies due to their theological emphasis on individual dignity and moral responsibility.[12]

Furthermore, Matthew Kroenig's 'Democratic Advantage Theory' provides robust empirical evidence that democratic nations consistently outperform autocracies, not only in terms of economic vitality but also in diplomatic influence, military effectiveness and technological innovation.[13] Democracies, according to Kroenig, are more adept at forging resilient alliances, fostering transparent institutions, and mobilizing societal resources towards long-term strategic objectives, whereas autocracies are hampered by opacity, internal suppression and short-termism.

Jordan Peterson offers a philosophical dimension to this thesis, emphasizing that the very idea of natural rights—so foundational to modern democratic theory—is inseparable from the Judeo-Christian worldview. Peterson argues that the Western conception of individual sovereignty is not merely a product of Enlightenment rationalism but is deeply embedded in the 'well-turned and carefully prepared ancient soil' of biblical religion.[14] The intrinsic dignity of man, the idea that each person bears the *imago Dei*, forms the ontological bedrock for human rights and democratic self-governance.

Thus, it becomes evident that Protestantism is not merely associated with but empirically intertwined with three of the most defining pillars of modern civilization: sustained economic growth, technological innovation, and the flourishing of democratic governance. These are not isolated phenomena; they are the outworking of a distinct theological vision that exalts individual responsibility, nurtures cultural trust and channels human creativity under the Lordship of Christ.

The Protestant Reformation—by emphasizing the priesthood of all believers, the sanctity of vocation and the authority of Scripture—unleashed a cultural dynamism that manifested itself in industrious economic systems (as Weber observed), pioneering technological ingenuity (as embodied by figures like Newcomen), and a political ethos that valued liberty, accountability and covenantal governance. Protestantism, therefore, should not be seen as a mere contributor to these civilizational trajectories but as the spiritual and philosophical engine driving them forward.

In this light, the empirical convergence of Protestant societies leading in economic vitality, technological advancement and democratic governance is not an historical accident. It is the visible fruit of a theological root—a worldview that sees human beings as image-bearers of the Creator, entrusted with the stewardship of creation, including its technological potentials, for the glory of God and the good of all nations.

This historical trajectory is rooted in a biblical narrative that frames humanity's relationship with technology from the very beginning. Renowned economist Tyler

12 Aristo Purboadji, 'Theological Defense for Human Rights in Indonesia', *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 11, no. 1 (2024): 2.

13 Matthew Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

14 Jordan Peterson, 'Religion, Sovereignty, Natural Rights, and the Constituent Elements of Experience', *Psychology of Religion* (2006), 175.

Cowen provocatively suggests that the book of Genesis serves as an early narrative about humanity's relationship with technology. He traces a trajectory from the tree of knowledge to Tubal-Cain, 'the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron', highlighting how technological progress is an inherent human impulse deeply embedded in the biblical story. Yet Cowen's reading also acknowledges a cautionary undertone, particularly evident in the story of the Tower of Babel, which he interprets as a divine intervention to curtail mankind's technological ambitions that risked rivalling God Himself.

I propose, therefore, a reframing: the mastery of technology is not inherently dangerous, but it demands a cultural soil prepared to steward it with humility and purpose. Societies shaped by Judeo-Christian convictions—particularly those nurtured by Protestantism's emphasis on individual calling, moral responsibility and the intrinsic dignity of work—provide the ethical and institutional frameworks where technological mastery can flourish safely. It is no coincidence that the most profound technological advancements have historically occurred within predominantly Protestant democracies,[15] where theological anthropology, civic institutions and economic freedoms align to channel human ingenuity for the common good.

Perhaps, in the providence of God, the scattering at Babel was a necessary restraint for a time when humanity lacked the moral infrastructure to wield such power wisely. But on this side of history—after the Incarnation and the redemptive work of Christ—the cultural soil has been progressively tilled through the centuries by biblical teaching, culminating in societies capable of harnessing technology under the lordship of Christ. The Protestant Reformation, by breaking down the barriers between sacred and secular vocations, unleashed a wave of technological innovation sanctified by a sense of divine calling. The contemporary church must recover a vision of technological stewardship, not technophobia, as an integral expression of the cultural mandate given in Genesis 1:28.

The theological argument

Humanity's cultural mandate to 'subdue the earth' (Gen 1:28) and the evangelical call to disciple the nations (Mt 28:18–20) collectively demand a proactive engagement with technology. Mastering technology is not ancillary but integral to the church's mission, serving as a means of missional expansion and holistic discipleship. This theological stance aligns with the evangelical conviction that every sphere of human endeavour—including technological innovation—must be brought under the lordship of Christ for the glory of God and the good of the world.

At its core, a theology of technological stewardship aligns seamlessly with the broader biblical vision of human flourishing. It is also deeply consonant with the evangelical emphasis on missiology and disciple-making. Central to this theological vision is the affirmation of human agency—not as autonomous rebellion but as participatory stewardship within God's redemptive purposes.

---

15 By 'Protestant democracies' I mean democracies created in predominantly Protestant countries, not ones controlled by a particular religious view. See Robert Woodberry and Timothy Shah, 'Christianity and Democracy: The Pioneering Protestants', *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 2 (2004): 47–61.

Thiel's essay confronts a recurring temptation in Christian thought: the nostalgic yearning for a return to Edenic simplicity. Thiel warns that this impulse is not only historically naïve but theologically misguided. 'To Eden there will be no returning', he writes, emphasizing that the biblical narrative moves not backward but forward—from the garden of Eden to the city of God (Rev 21). Thiel frames technological progress as an eschatological vocation, a necessary precondition for sustaining a planetary civilization of 10 billion people, and a task that believers should embrace as co-labourers with God in the unfolding of His Kingdom.

Within this context, the role of human agency is not a peripheral concern but a theological imperative. Theosis—the doctrine of participation in the divine nature—provides a robust theological framework for this vision. Though theosis is traditionally emphasized in Eastern Orthodoxy, scholars such as Rakerstraw have argued for its deep resonance with evangelical theology, particularly when understood as a call for believers to embody the life of Christ here and now.[16] I have proposed elsewhere that 'Theosis, as a doctrine of participation in divine nature, can be seen as a participation of bringing heaven on earth. Theosis concerns with the heaven that is here and now, not just the heaven of the afterlife.'[17]

Thus, technological mastery is not a humanistic overreach but an act of theotic participation—God working in us and through us. Theosis makes explicit what is implicit in the biblical cultural mandate: that God's plan of redeeming and transforming the world is mediated through human agency. It is a calling to become co-creators under divine lordship, advancing human flourishing not in opposition to God's sovereignty but as an outworking of it.

Christ is not merely above us but within us, working through each believer as an agent of transformation. The plan of salvation is not a monologue from heaven but a dialogue where believers are active participants in realizing the Kingdom ethic in every domain of life, including technology. Technological mastery, then, becomes an expression of theosis—a tangible manifestation of 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (Col 1:27).

The strategic imperative: Safeguarding peace and democracy

This theological calling to embody Christ's work in the world has a profound strategic implication: for such creative stewardship to flourish, the global conditions of peace and freedom must be actively preserved. Immanuel Kant, in his seminal essay *Perpetual Peace* (1795), introduced the foundational idea that 'peace through deterrence' is a necessary condition for stability in a world where not all states are equally committed to peace. Kant argued that republican (what we now call democratic) states are inherently more peaceful than autocracies, as their political structures are designed to reflect the will and consent of the governed. However, Kant was also sober in his realism: when confronted with authoritarian regimes, the only pathway to lasting peace is through credible deterrence. Persuasion alone is insufficient; power must be balanced by power.

16 R. V. Rakerstraw, 'Becoming Like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 4 (1997): 257–269.

17 Aristo Purboadji, 'Can Theosis Deradicalize Christian Fundamentalism?' *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 10, no. 1 (2023): 12–13.

In the contemporary era of great power competition, where technological supremacy has become the decisive factor in economic, diplomatic and military influence, the mastery of technology is not a luxury but a moral imperative. For those of us who profess to love peace and human flourishing, particularly as followers of Christ, it is no longer sufficient to be passive observers of technological progress. If we genuinely care about the peace and stability of the world, we must ensure that the reins of technological mastery remain firmly in the hands of peace-loving, democratic societies.

The moral stakes are high. If, as we have established, democracy has been a catalyst for human flourishing—and if democracy itself is deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian vision of human dignity and moral responsibility—then Christians bear a unique obligation to safeguard its future. Technological mastery is not merely a tool of economic competitiveness; it has become a pillar upon which the very balance of global order rests.

To abdicate our engagement with technology is to risk ceding this pillar to regimes that share neither our theological anthropology nor our vision of peace grounded in human dignity. Thus, the pursuit of technological mastery is not a triumphalist bid for dominance but a strategic and theological act of stewardship—one that serves the preservation of a global order conducive to human flourishing, freedom, and the advancement of the gospel.

A theology of technological stewardship is already implicit in major evangelical consensus documents. The Seoul Statement, for instance, devotes an entire section to technology, affirming that technological ability reflects the *imago Dei* while also warning that sin distorts its development. Crucially, it calls Christians not only to critique but to 'faithfully steward technology'. This is precisely the heart of technological stewardship: neither uncritical embrace nor fearful withdrawal, but discerning leadership that channels innovation toward creation care and gospel witness.

Likewise, the State of the Great Commission Report (SCGR) identifies rapid digitalization as one of the defining realities of discipleship today. It observes that smartphones have become 'an extension of the self', reshaping how younger generations experience community and faith, and insists that the church must equip families to navigate this digital environment. Such counsel assumes that technology cannot be treated as a neutral backdrop; it requires active pastoral guidance and cultural shaping. In this way, the SGCR already embeds a stewardship paradigm, calling the church to take responsibility for how digital infrastructures form Christian life. Building on these foundations, an evangelical theology of technology stewardship brings to the surface what Lausanne has articulated implicitly. It declares that to fulfil the Great Commission in a digital age, evangelicals must not only use technology but also lead in its faithful development and direction.

Conclusion: A missiological mandate for the digital age

In this light, an evangelical theology of technology stewardship is not merely an academic construct, but a missional imperative. If the church retreats from technology, it would be retreating from a critical frontline in the cultural mandate and the Great Commission.

At its core, evangelism is an act of information dissemination that involves proclaiming the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation. In an age where the infrastructures of information—freedom of speech, expression, and digital communication—are inseparably tied to technological advancement, Christians cannot afford to be mere spectators. Preserving the preconditions for gospel transmission demands active stewardship of technology, ensuring that these tools remain in the hands of those who cherish freedom and truth.

Doctrinally, the gospel declares that human beings are created in the *imago Dei*. To believe in Christ is to embrace this divine imprint, which compels us to be creators, innovators and stewards of the world we are entrusted with. Technological innovation, then, becomes an act of obedience, a living witness to the creative character of God reflected through His people.

But beyond strategy, technology mastery is an expression of love. Every life saved through medical advancements, every suffering alleviated through innovative solutions, is a testament to the love of Christ in action. When we harness technology to heal, uplift and restore, we embody the gospel that we preach. In this sense, technological mastery becomes not just a cultural activity but a way of bearing witness to the Kingdom by doing good to humanity.

An evangelical theology of technology stewardship is not an optional doctrine for tech enthusiasts; it is the very extension of the Great Commission into the digital age. To innovate is to imitate Christ. To lead in technology is to safeguard the channels of gospel proclamation. To create is to worship. And to serve humanity through technology is to witness—proclaiming with deeds what we preach with words.

ERT (2025) 49:2, 151–159

One Thing Necessary

Richard L. Smith

Is it important whether Jesus was literate or illiterate, educated or uneducated? Was he merely a clever peasant with a talent for improvisation, or was he also an astute theologian and rhetorician? Is his intellectuality relevant to the church today? I argue that the answer to each of these questions is an emphatic 'yes!'

This article outlines the debate about Jesus' understanding and sketches his epistemic orientation during his earthly lifetime. It also describes a model of how Jesus' followers can love God with their mind. I provide suggestions for developing mental piety based on our ministry in Buenos Aires, the Kuyper Centre for Christian Studies.

The great debate

From the beginning, Jesus' knowledge has been a point of contention. Doubts about his intellectual acumen appeared when he first preached in his hometown, Nazareth. The listeners wondered out loud, 'Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him?' (Mk 6:2). Very quickly, they determined that his educational pedigree was lacking and concluded, 'Is not this the carpenter …? And they took offense at him' (v. 3). John records a similar skeptical query, 'How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?' (7:15).[1]

The controversy did not end with Jesus' death and resurrection. In Acts 4, when the apostles testified about the Lord in the public square, the theological elite was outraged. They castigated the apostles over their supposed ignorance and their lower social status. Their interlocutors inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' (4:7). Then, with disdain, they dismissed the heralds as 'common' people and 'uneducated' (v. 13).

As the church gained converts among the upper and educated classes within the non-Jewish world, the charge of ignorance and anti-intellectualism was heard again. The pagan philosopher Celsus produced an influential critique of Christians as foolish and unworthy of consideration. John Avery Dulles described Celsus' criticism in this way:

> The Christians, he argues, demand a faith not based on examination, and this can only be an irrational commitment. Further, they shun open debate with the

Richard L. Smith (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) serves as the Director of the Centro de Estudios Cristianos Kuyper in Buenos Aires (Kuyper Christian Study Center). He is the author of *Such a Mind as This: A Biblical-Theological Study of Thinking in the Old Testament* (Wipf & Stock, 2021). This article is revised from a paper presented at the Consortium of Christian Studies Centers annual conference held in Charlottesville, Virginia on 22 July 2025. Email: comenius1251@gmail.com.

1 All Scripture citations are from the English Standard Version.

> learned. They operate as a secret society and, despising wisdom, seduce the ignorant and the credulous. The Bible is full of childish legends and far below the finest achievements of classical history.[2]

In our day, as well, Jesus appears often as an intellectual wannabe among critical scholars. Author Chris Keith, argues that Jesus was not educated but could make others think he was, observes candidly, 'In terms of topic, and to be blunt, many scholars considered (and still consider) the issue of Jesus' literacy and education to be a joke of a topic.'[3]

Indeed, the image of Jesus as a brilliant thinker and intellectual model has frequently been a major item of dispute. Even among Christian academics, an illiterate Jesus is often the default image. New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey confessed, 'I discovered that I had been unconsciously trained to admire everything about Jesus except his intellectual astuteness.'[4]

Clearly, the neglect of Jesus' 'intellectual astuteness' impacts the church. He is not often described as an exceptional thinker or intellectual exemplar in the Gospels. For this reason, we do not usually connect the dots between Jesus' mental profile on earth and our obligation to love God with the mind (Mk 12:30), for which he is the paradigm.[5]

Two well-known Christian thinkers explain that minimizing biblical intellectuality, especially Jesus' mental outlook, impacts followers of Christ. Paul Gould, a philosopher, writes:

> While experts within their own particular fields of study, Christian professors often possess a Sunday school level of education when it comes to matters theological and philosophical … and the result is a patchwork attempt to integrate one's faith with one's scholarly work and an inability to fit the pieces of one's life into God's larger story.[6]

John Frame, a theologian, says that Christians have a God-given 'stewardship of the mind and intellect', adding:

> It is remarkable that Christians so readily identify the lordship of Christ in matters of worship, salvation, and ethics, but not in thinking. But … God in Scripture over and over demands obedience of his people in matters of wisdom, thinking, knowledge, understanding, and so forth.[7]

Connecting Jesus' mental posture as a human being with the demand to love God with the mind, therefore, is very important and quite relevant. He commissions his followers to imitate his thought life—the what, why, and how—though we are finite

---

2 Avery Cardinal Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 43.

3 Chris Keith, 'Jesus Against the Scribal Elite', https://syndicate.network/?p=3216.

4 Kenneth Bailey, as cited in Peter J. Williams, *The Surprising Genius of Jesus: What the Gospels Reveal about the Greatest Teacher* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 1.

5 Jesus' mission to 'fulfil' (enact and embody) the 'Law and the Prophets' (Mt 5:17) included the creedal nucleus of the Old Testament, the Shema (Deut 6:4–5). For more information, see my article 'Such a Heart as This', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 46, no. 1 (February 2022): 24–37.

6 Paul M. Gould, *The Outrageous Idea of the Missional Professor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 7.

7 John Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2015), 5.

and fallen. And we should train disciples to do the same (Mt 28:19).

Jesus' intellectual profile

Below, I outline briefly nine themes regarding Jesus' epistemic profile in the Gospels, in accord with the Shema (Deut 6:4–5) and the command to love God with our mind (Mk 12:28–31).

First, Jesus demonstrated the supreme importance of listening to and learning from God. He said, 'I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgement is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me' (Jn 5:13). He confessed, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing' (Jn 5:19). For this reason, Jesus often withdrew 'by himself' (Mt 14:23) to 'desolate' locations (Mk 1:35) to pray, usually at night. In moments of decision or at pivotal points in his ministry, he sought his Father's counsel and consolation: before calling the apostles (Mk 3:13), when his countrymen sought to make him king (Jn 6:15), after times of intense ministry (Mk 6:44–46), as people speculated about his identity (Lk 9:18), when God spoke of him in affirmation (Mt 17:1–5), and in his moment of great apprehension (Lk 22:41–43). Jesus' prayers also demonstrated his theocentric focus—for instance, when teaching about prayer (Mt 6:9–10), praying for his followers (Jn 17), and giving thanks (Lk 22:17; Jn 11:41b–42).

Second, Jesus acknowledged the intellectual primacy of Scripture. When tempted by the devil, he cited passages from Deuteronomy (Lk 4:1–13). When he was dying on the cross, he referred to the Psalms (Mt 27:46). He continually referenced the Old Testament and reasoned from its precepts (Mt 12:3; Lk 4:21). In short, Jesus presupposed the biblical worldview. Everything he thought, spoke, desired, and performed was conditioned by God's law, the Torah, and wisdom. For this reason, he possessed both biblical literacy and fluency, which he acquired from his Jewish upbringing, synagogue, and culture.

Third, Jesus modelled the fear of God intellectually and ethically. He embraced Proverbs 1:7, 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.' He embodied Proverbs 3:5–7, 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.' In this way, Jesus replicated the wisdom of the sons of Issachar, 'who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do' (1 Chr 12:32).

Indeed, Jesus was utterly wise, and he embodied Old Testament wisdom.[8] He knew what was truly important and what to do about it in the most fruitful manner.

---

8 Ryan O'Dowd comments, 'The wisdom tradition was at its peak at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry.' See O'Dowd, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 44. See also Cornelis Bennema, 'Strands of Wisdom Tradition in Intertestamental Judaism: Origins, Developments, and Characteristics', *Tyndale Bulletin* 51, no. 1 (2002); 61–82; Fred W. Burnett and Cornelis Bennema, 'Wisdom', in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 995–1000; Dianne Jacobson, 'Jesus as Wisdom in the New Testament', *Word and World,* Supp. Series 3 (1997): 72–93; Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Ben Witherington III, *Matthew* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2006), 16–21.

He could not be distracted or manipulated by folly. He could not be deterred from his Father's mission to pursue a fool's errand, such as when the crowds sought to 'make him king' and thereby reframe his calling. Even as a child, Jesus was 'filled with wisdom' (Lk 2:40) and 'increased in wisdom' as he matured (2:52). When he was 12 years old, Temple scholars were 'amazed at his understanding' (2:47), as were many in the crowds who heard his teaching (Mt 13:54).

Fourth, Jesus was supremely knowledgeable, unlike his peers from the same social class. Evidence indicates that he spoke Aramaic and Hebrew. He communicated, as well, in Greek and spoke at least some Latin.[9] He could read and write, as most well-trained scribes could.[10] He understood the ethnic and religious distinctives of Palestine. He possessed a thorough knowledge of Jewish history and Scripture, as well as familiarity with the concepts of the Second Temple period. He manifested keen spiritual awareness and astute theological reasoning.[11]

Fifth, Jesus knew how to communicate with whomever he interacted with. He understood how to keep every interchange on point, how to refute and critique false reasoning, and how to guide each seeker towards the truth. He was also an extraordinarily gifted teacher and communicator. Listeners were often astounded. The Gospels reveal that the theological elite forsook attempts to entrap him intellectually (Mk 12:34; Lk 20:40).[12]

Sixth, Jesus thoroughly comprehended human depravity and the intellectual impact of sin, individually and corporately (Mk 7:20–22; Jn 2:25). He discerned our twisted reasoning and foolish mindset.[13] He understood that sin and the supernatural impact what and how we think (Jn 13:2). He recognized the antithetical agenda

9 Ken M. Campbell, 'What was Jesus' Occupation?' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 3 (September 2005): 501–19; Ken Dark, *Archeology of Jesus' Nazareth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Craig K. Evans, 'Context, Family and Formation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Craig K. Evans, 'The Misplaced Jesus: Interpreting Jesus in a Judaic Context', in *The Missing Jesus: Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament*, ed. Bruce Chilton, Craig K. Evans, and Jacob Neusner (Boston: Brill, 2002), 11–44.

10 Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011); Sanghwan Lee, 'Defending Multilingual Galilee from Its Literary and Archeological Objections', *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 16 (2020): 183–99; Brian J. Wright, *Communal Reading in the Time of Jesus: A Window into Early Christian Reading Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

11 See Williams, *The Surprising Genius of Jesus;* Hughson T. Ong, *The Multilingual Jesus and the Sociolinguistic World of the New Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2016).

12 Consider the dialogues with Nicodemus in John 3, the Samaritan woman in John 4, and the man born blind in John 9, as well as the rich young man (Mk 10) and the disciples traveling to Emmaus (Lk 24). See Michal Beth Dinkler, 'Silence as Rhetorical Technique in Luke 14:1–6', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (Winter 2013): 337–48; Douglas Estes, *The Questions of Jesus in John: Logic, Rhetoric and Persuasive Discourse* (Boston: Brill, 2013); Chris Keith, *Jesus against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict* (New York: T&T Clark, 2020); Joshua Paul Smith, 'I Will Also Ask You a Question' (Luke 20:3): The Social and Rhetorical Function of Opposing-Turn Questions in the Gospel of Luke', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 52, no. 3 (2022): 172–81; Tom Thatcher, *Jesus the Riddler: The Power of Ambiguity in the Gospels* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

13 John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 49–61; Glenn D. Pemberton, 'It's a Fool's Life: The Deformation of Character in Proverbs', *Restoration Quarterly* 50 (2008): 213–24; Richard L. Smith, *Such a Mind as This: A Biblical-Theological Study of Thinking in the Old Testament* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2021).

of the devil and his dominion. He perceived the distorted nature of sinful ideology, groupthink, and oppressive institutions (Mt 11:8; 20:25; Lk 13:31–32). He realized that what and whom we listen to informs our thinking, for good or bad.

Seventh, Jesus' knowing was eschatologically conditioned. He defined his earthly existence in terms of God's redemptive plan from creation, through Israel and the church, to restoration.[14] He knew exactly where he came from, his historical context in first-century Palestine (with its social, spiritual, and political complexity), and to where (or to whom) he would return. His thinking was aligned with the 'age to come' (Mk 10:30) and not with 'this evil generation' (Mt 12:45) or the 'present evil age' (Gal 1:4), as Paul described.

Eighth, Jesus' intellectuality was situated by both his divine nature *and* the incarnation, for the divine 'Word became flesh' (Jn 1:14). Jesus expressed ideas commensurate with omniscience (Jn 8:58). He possessed mental powers eschatologically endowed by the Holy Spirit in fulfilment of Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2:34–35). For this reason, the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) taught that he was 'fully God'.[15] Yet the ancient creed also explained that he was 'fully man'. His epistemic profile manifested both divine and human aspects (though without sin). Mike Riccardi comments:

> So when Scripture affirms seemingly contradictory realities concerning the incarnate Christ—that He is eternal God, yet born in time; Creator, yet possessor of a created body; sustaining the universe while being sustained by Mary; omniscient God, yet ignorant and increasing in wisdom; omnipotent Lord, yet exhausted and sleeping—it is affirming nothing other than the hypostatic union, that Christ is one person subsisting in two distinct yet inseparable natures. He is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, Creator, and Sustainer according to His deity, and yet temporal, ignorant, weak, created, and sustained according to His humanity.[16]

Ninth, because of his humanity, Jesus became our example in all things (Phil 2:5; Heb 4:15). Bruce A. Ware asks, 'What dimensions of the life, ministry, mission, and work of Jesus Christ can be accounted for fully and understood rightly only when seen through the lens of his humanity?'[17] Jesus modelled the mindset that God expected from Adam and Israel. He 'fulfilled' the Law by obeying the Shema (Deut 6:4–5) and Great Commandment (Mk 12:29–31), including the command to love

---

14 Geerhardus Vos wrote, 'Jesus being consciously the Messiah, his whole manner of thinking and feeling could not otherwise be steeped in this atmosphere. … The consummate expression of this principle is seen in the eschatological outlook, both backward and forward, which accompanied Christianity from its very birth. … It is the mother-soil out of which the tree of the whole redemptive organism has sprung.' Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus: The Modern Debate about the Messianic Consciousness* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Eerdmans, 1953, 21–22). Jesus spoke at length about the end of this age (Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 21). He referred to the world to come in Matthew 19:28: 'Truly, I say to you, in the new world (*paliggenesia*), when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.'

15 These reasons included, obviously, his omnipotent deeds and Trinitarian teaching.

16 Mike Riccardi, 'Veiled in Flesh the Godhead See: A Study of the Kenosis of Christ', *The Master's Seminary Journal* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 26.

17 Bruce A. Ware, *The Man Christ Jesus: Theological Reflections on the Humanity of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 30.

God 'with all the mind'. Jesus assumed 'the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men' and 'humbled himself by becoming obedient' (Phil 2:7–8). He learned as a devout Hebrew should—from his family, Scripture, synagogue, and Temple. Thus, Jesus modelled intellectual piety and showed what, why, and how to think as creatures made in God's image. In effect, Jesus told us, 'Follow me! Steward your minds in ways that honor God and bless others.'

In short, the man Jesus was brilliant, a savant, a true sage, even a scholar. Jesus loved God with all his mind, despite the chaotic, confusing, and demonic context in which he ministered. He manifested right thinking, pious motivation, wise application, and true love for others, according to the Shema and Great Commandment. He exhibited mental piety and sacred shrewdness in our twisted and deconstructive world (Mt 10:16). The obvious implication is that we should do likewise—that is, practice Shema spirituality and thereby learn to love God with all our minds.

Mary of Bethany

Let us now consider an example of holistic spirituality among the disciples of Jesus, including intellectual piety—Mary of Bethany, Martha and Lazarus's sister. Her devotion is mentioned five times in the Gospels, which is significant.[18] Most scholars agree that each episode refers to the same person, though there are some variations in the text.

This is how John describes Mary's poignant encounter with Jesus:

> Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot … having charge of the money-bag he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, 'Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial.' (12:1–7)

Matthew and Mark add Jesus' comment, 'Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her' (Mt 26:13; Mk 14:9).

I often wonder why she made such a great economic sacrifice. What did she know about Jesus that the others missed? And how did she know it? Why did Jesus say, 'Wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her'? Here we are today, thinking about her 2,000 years later. Why? I think the answers are found in Luke 10:38–42:

---

18 Mary Ann Beavis, 'Reconsidering Mary of Bethany', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (April 2012): 281–97; Santiago Guijarro and Ana Rodríguez, 'The 'Messianic' Anointing of Jesus (Mark 14:3–9)', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41, no. 3 (2011): 132–43; Dominika A. Kurek-Chomycz, 'The Fragrance of Her Perfume: The Significance of Sense Imagery in John's Account of the Anointing in Bethany', *Novum Testamentum* 52 (2010): 334–54; J. Lionel North, 'One Thing Is "Necessary"' (Luke 10.42): Text, Subtext and Context', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 66 (1997): 3–13.

> Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, 'Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me.' But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.'

I offer these observations. First, Martha was 'distracted'. Is that not the case with many of us? We are often sidetracked by life: our careers, research, projects, status, economic well-being, reputation, and even sometimes triviality.

Second, Mary 'sat at the Lord's feet', which is the posture of a disciple in antiquity. She 'listened to his teaching', for she was an avid student of Jesus. To her, he was supremely interesting, and she was curious. How different we often are, sometimes bored with the Bible. We often fail to discern its beauty, relevance, or brilliance, as Mary did as she listened to Jesus.

Third, Mary acknowledged his wisdom and understanding. She perceived something essential about the Lord. Mary understood who he was—the Messiah who would die for our sin.[19]

Fourth, Mary was a true disciple. Jesus' teaching and example transformed her mind, purified her desires, and inspired adoration, which is Shema-inspired, holistic spirituality. For this reason, Mary *chose* 'the good portion'. Her most profound hopes and concerns were aligned with the Lord's agenda.

Fifth, she did the 'one thing necessary', which is listening to the Lord, learning from him, and learning to love God with the mind. Just as Jesus practiced the 'one thing necessary' and listened to the Father, Mary listened to Jesus.

Mary demonstrated her true understanding and real priorities with an extraordinary sacrifice. Her mind (knowledge, curiosity, learning, imagination), soul (her deepest motives, true desires, and aspirations), and strength (her every capacity and asset)—all of her being was dedicated to knowing God and serving others.

Mary showed that a mind informed by revelation (that learns the divine Word) generates godly motivation (the fear of God) and fosters stewardship that demonstrates love in action. The mind, desire, and capacity should be dedicated to the Lord. To put it another way, holistic spirituality refers to an integrated piety of the head, heart, and hand.

Jesus modelled this Great Commandment and Mary imitated his example. And for this reason, she is still remembered. We should follow her example. The 'one thing necessary' begins with the mind but is expressed in who we are and what we do and say for the Lord and others.

---

19 That Mary discerned Jesus as the Messiah *and* that he would die for our sin is reasonable, given John's placement of the event 'six days before the Passover', the linkage to Jesus' death ('for the day of my burial'), and the excessive value of her sacrifice and emotive conduct. In addition, Jesus expressed multiple times, explicitly and implicitly, that the Son of Man would be 'lifted up' (Jn 3:14; 6:62; 8:28; 12:23, 34; 13:31).

To express it another way, cultivating minds that love the Lord is an integral aspect of biblical spirituality. Disciples of Jesus Christ have no justification for wilful biblical-theological ignorance or anti-intellectualism.

Suggestions

At the Kuyper Centre for Christian Studies in Buenos Aires, our motto is 'cultivating the mind to love God fully'. We promote a model of holistic spirituality derived from the Shema, the Great Commandment, and the Great Commission, where loving God with the mind plays a central role.

However, we often encounter obstacles to embracing the 'one thing necessary'. For instance, many of those who participate in our centre do not know how to read critically. Most are passive consumers of popular culture and do not possess criteria for evaluating and engaging the world for Christ. These are typical attitudes that we encounter:

Ignorance: Many know very little about the Bible and theology, worldview or the relevant biblical-theological thinkers. And they usually do not perceive the need or relevance of such knowledge.

Anti-intellectualism: Some resist study and reflection because their religious tradition minimizes the need for theology or intellectual effort.

Curiosity without commitment: Some enjoy intellectual entertainment but are unwilling to discipline their minds or submit to programmatic learning.[20]

Consumer approach: Some 'shop' for knowledge, learning formats, and instructors that conform to their 'buying' preferences. When study becomes difficult or boring, they take their 'business' elsewhere.

Triviality: Most are conditioned by modern technology and inconsequential chatter through social media, so they are not prepared to read or reflect deeply.

Passivity: Some fulfil the role assigned to them by society—intellectual simplicity and subjective spirituality.

Social obstacles: Many are distracted by the demands of culture (sports, social life, entertainment).

With these challenges in mind, our educational objectives are to stimulate intellectual curiosity and encourage further study. We design activities that foster biblical literacy and critical thinking together. When we identify committed learners, we broaden and deepen their knowledge. We stress, for instance:

Informal discussion: Participants at our centre meet to watch biblical or theological lectures and discuss their implications. In this way, we learn to think together, using our biblical assumptions. We also share a meal and pray. Basically, these meetings are little learning communities.

Communal reading: We read together Charles Cotherman's *To Think Christianly*, my book *Such a Mind as This*, John Murray's *Redemption Accomplished and Ap-*

20 See Acts 17:21 for a similar attitude.

plied, and Daniel Strange's *Making Faith Magnetic*.[21] Groups also read articles and chapters online. We provide, as well, in-person and online seminars about presuppositional apologetics, Old Testament wisdom, public theology, and neo-Calvinism.

Movie discussions: Films are saturated with implicit and explicit theology and worldview. Analyzing movies is an asymmetrical way to teach the biblical outlook and foster critical thinking.[22] To facilitate thoughtful discussion, we prepare questions and provide them to the participants.[23]

At the Kuyper Centre, we foster minds that discern the 'one thing necessary'. We stress the obligation, beauty, and relevance of loving God with 'all the mind' as a key aspect of biblical spirituality.

Conclusion

This article suggests that Christians should celebrate Jesus' 'intellectual astuteness' in the Gospels and learn to think like him. He is our epistemic paradigm. We should obey the command to love God with the mind, as he did. For this reason, biblical literacy, worldview reasoning, and intellectual virtue are essential for followers of Jesus Christ.[24]

Mary of Bethany imitated Jesus' example. She recognized the 'one thing necessary'—listening to the Lord. She modelled intellectual piety as a critical aspect of Christian spirituality. She demonstrated Shema-inspired discipleship for everyday believers like us. For this reason, we should also embrace the 'good portion', as she did.

To state the matter negatively, followers of Jesus Christ need more than a mere 'Sunday school level of education'. We must recognize that God demands 'obedience of his people in matters of wisdom, thinking, and knowledge'. Christian disciples have no excuse for wilful biblical-theological ignorance or anti-intellectualism.

---

21 Charles E. Cotherman, *To Think Christianly: A History of L'Abri, Regent College, and the Christian Study Center Movement* (Lisle, IL: IVP Academic, 2021); John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); Daniel Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic: Five Hidden Themes Our Culture Can't Stop Talking About and How to Connect them to Christ* (Surrey, England: The Good Book Company, 2022).

22 We have watched *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *The Mission*, *Soul*, *Barbie*, *Amazing Grace*, *The Hidden Life*, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, and *Inside-Out 1 and 2*.

23 For example, our list of questions for *Barbie* includes the following: (1) What is Barbie Land? (2) What happened to Barbie that changed her perception of reality? (3) What does Weird Barbie represent? (4) Why did Barbie choose to become human instead of staying in Barbie Land? (5) Does the movie correctly represent the relationship between men and women? (6) How does our biblical worldview impact how we evaluate the movie?

24 See Elmer John Thiessen, *Healthy Christian Minds: A Biblical, Practical, and Sometimes Philosophical Exploration of Intellectual Virtues and Vices* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024).

ERT (2025) 49:2, 160–174

Missiological Exploration of Old Testament Foundation for the Great Commission

Victor Umaru

The Great Commission, as recorded in Matthew 28:18–20, is one of the most critical passages in the New Testament. Joe M. Kapolyo states, 'For the majority of Christians, the mission starts and ends with Matthew 28:18–20. This text occupies a place in our understanding of mission, but is just the apex of everything the Bible says about God and mission.'[1] The directive is not merely a command but a comprehensive mandate that encapsulates the essence of the church's mission: spreading the gospel, discipling nations, and expanding God's kingdom globally.

However, many Christians and even some biblical scholars tend to view the Great Commission primarily as a New Testament phenomenon, overlooking the rich Old Testament foundations that undergird this global mandate. This perception overlooks how the OT is replete with themes, narratives, and promises that point towards a universal mission. H. Cornell Goerner captures it well when he states that mission is 'the theme of the Bible'.[2] The OT foundations for the Great Commission demonstrate that it is not an isolated directive introduced by Jesus but a continuation and fulfilment of God's redemptive purposes revealed throughout the OT. This study examines vital texts, themes, and narratives within the Hebrew Scriptures to understand comprehensively how the OT anticipates and informs the NT mandate of the Great Commission.

The concept of mission in the Old Testament

The term 'mission' in its contemporary sense may not appear explicitly in the OT, but the concept is inherently woven into its fabric. Essentially, mission in the OT should be understood as the divine initiative to bring about the reconciliation and restoration of creation through God's chosen people, Israel. This initiative is diverse in calling, commissioning, and sending individuals to participate in God's redemptive work. According to Van Rheenen, mission 'is the very nature of God. He is always giving, relating, reconciling, and redeeming! He is the spring that gives forth

Victor Umaru (MTh, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary; MA, Bowen University) lectures at the Baptist College of Theology in Obinze, Owerri, Nigeria, and also lectures internationally in biblical studies and theology. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Old Testament language and literature at the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary. Email: victorumaru@bcto.com.ng.

1 Joe M. Kapolyo, 'The Easneye Lectures', cited in Richard Bauckham, ed., *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), viii.

2 H. Cornell Goerner, *All Nations in God's Purpose* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1979), 11.

living water—the source of mission! From the very foundation of the world, God has been the great initiator of mission, as vividly portrayed by the acts of God in both the Old and New Testaments.'[3]

At the heart of mission in the OT is the divine initiative. God is the primary agent, and His actions throughout the OT reveal a consistent purpose of restoring and reconciling creation with Himself. This divine initiative is evident from the beginning with God's creative acts in Genesis. The creation narrative portrays God's intention for a harmonious world under His sovereign rule. According to R. H. Glover:

> Throughout the Bible God's thoughts and plans for the world's evangelisation are everywhere in evidence. From cover to cover, the Bible is a missionary book, so much so that, as someone has expressed it, one cannot cut out its missionary significance without completely destroying the book. For, let it be understood, scriptural authority for worldwide missions rests not merely upon a group of proof texts, but upon the entire design and spirit of the Bible as it reveals God in His relation to men and nations, and as it traces the unfolding of His purposes down through the ages.[4]

Despite the fall of humanity, which introduces sin and brokenness into the world, God's redemptive purpose remains steadfast. Mission in the OT is grounded in the nature and character of God. Don Fanning states, 'Mission is rooted like God, who sends and saves.'[5] God is depicted as a loving Creator, a faithful covenant-keeper, and a just Redeemer. These attributes drive His mission to restore creation and redeem humanity. It involves concrete actions: living out covenantal faithfulness and proclaiming God's truth to a watching world. The holistic nature of mission in the OT is also noteworthy. It encompasses spiritual, social, and emotional dimensions.

Particularism, monotheism, and idolatry in shaping Old Testament mission

The OT narrative contains a coherent theology that is embedded within the historical context of Israel's relationship with God. Central to this theology are three interrelated concepts: particularism, monotheism, and idolatry. These themes are not isolated doctrines but function together to form Israel's identity, mission, and role among the nations. Their significance becomes evident when analysed within the trajectory of God's redemptive purposes throughout the Hebrew Bible.

With reference to the OT, the concept of *particularism* refers to God's unique election of Israel as His covenant people. This election begins with the call of Abram in Genesis 12:1–3, in which God promises to bless him and to bless all the families of the earth through him. Although the election is particular in nature, the intent is universal. Israel's status as the chosen people is not for its own sake alone but for a

3 G. Van Rheenen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 14.

4 R. H. Glover, 'The Bible and Missions: The Missionary Character of the Scriptures', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (1936): 102.

5 Don Fanning, 'Mission in the Old Testament', *Themes of Theology That Impacts Missions* (2009): 1, http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgm_theo/1.

vocation to mediate God's blessing to the nations. Christopher J. H. Wright argues in this regard that election must be understood as instrumental rather than exclusive. Israel is elected to serve, not to dominate.[6] However, the tension in Israel's particularism lies in the recurring temptation to interpret election as privilege rather than responsibility. The prophets frequently challenge Israel for adopting a posture of superiority and exclusivity, especially when such attitudes led to spiritual failure. Amos, for example, rebukes Israel for presuming upon its election while practising injustice and idolatry (Amos 3:2).[7] Thus, particularism must be interpreted through the lens of vocation rather than nationalism.

The heart of Israel's faith is its confession of Yahweh's exclusive sovereignty, encapsulated in the Shema: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deut 6:4). Monotheism, therefore, is not simply a metaphysical claim; it is the foundation for Israel's life and missionary mandate. The belief in one God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sovereign over all nations implies that Yahweh's authority extends beyond Israel's borders.[8] Walter Brueggemann thus argues that Israel's monotheism is inherently polemical. It denies legitimacy to the gods of surrounding nations and asserts the exclusivity of Yahweh's rule.[9] The implication is that the one true God is not a tribal deity but the Lord of all the earth. Isaiah 45:5–6 and 45:22 present a clear universal invitation: 'Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.' This prophetic view expands the scope of Israel's monotheistic confession into a global summons.

Monotheism also confronts the dimensions of idolatry and injustice. The unity of God is linked to the unity of creation and the coherence of moral order. Gerhard von Rad notes that the concept of YHWH as a singular, sovereign God undergirds the prophets' demands for justice, righteousness, and covenantal fidelity.[10] The confession of one God who is holy compels Israel to embody those same characteristics in its life. When Israel fails to do so, its witness is compromised and the nation is distorted. In addition, the monotheistic worldview enables Israel to understand exile and restoration within the context of divine sovereignty. Even when displaced among the nations, Israel's faith asserts that Yahweh remains in control. Daniel's confessions and prayers (Dan 2:20–23; 9:4–19) reflect a monotheistic faith that transcends geography and cultural pluralism. Such convictions maintain Israel's distinct identity and awareness even in diasporic contexts.

Idolatry in the OT is not merely the worship of false gods; it represents a fundamental distortion of the divine image and a disruption of Israel's mission. The biblical narrative consistently presents idolatry as a breach of covenant and a betrayal of Israel's vocation to be a light to the nations. Isaiah 44:9–20 mocks the irrationality of idol-making, its futility, and the self-deception it entails. The polemic against

6 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 200–203.

7 Amos N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 142–45.

8 T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 89–91.

9 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 460–62.

10 Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 370–72.

idolatry in the Old Testament operates on multiple levels: *theological*, asserting that Yahweh alone is God and that no other deity can rival His sovereignty; *moral*, exposing how idolatry inevitably leads to injustice and social corruption; and *anthropological*, revealing that idolatry distorts the divine image that Israel is called to embody before the nations.[11]

For this reason, John Goldingay explains that idolatry in the OT is not just a religious error but a social and political failure.[12] It leads to systems of oppression, economic exploitation, and moral corruption. The golden calf episode in Exodus 32, for instance, results not only in apostasy but in social chaos. Israel's embrace of idolatry compromises it and provokes divine judgement. The exile is portrayed in the prophetic literature as the consequence of persistent idolatry (Ezek 6; Jer 2). Yet even judgement serves a function. In Ezekiel 36:23, God declares that He will vindicate His holiness among the nations by restoring Israel, 'so that the nations will know that I am the Lord'. Daniel Block notes that this restoration is not merely for Israel's benefit but to reestablish the credibility of God's name among the nations.[13] Idolatry, therefore, is not just a failure of worship but a distortion of witness, and God's response is both disciplinary and restorative in its intention.

The relationship between particularism, monotheism, and idolatry forms a triad that shapes Israel's identity and vocation. Israel is chosen to be distinct (*particularism*), to proclaim the one true God (*monotheism*), and to reject the false worship that compromises its calling (*idolatry*). These elements are not mutually exclusive but interconnected. Particularism without monotheism degenerates into nationalism; monotheism without particularism becomes abstract theology; and both of the former lose their power when compromised by idolatry. Israel is called to be not only God's servant but also a light to the nations (Isa 49:6). In its original context, this designation applies to Israel as the chosen servant through whom God's salvation is to reach the ends of the earth. Yet the New Testament later applies this same verse to Christ, who embodies and fulfils Israel's vocation as the true Servant of the Lord. This vocation depends upon a faithful adherence to monotheistic worship and a rejection of idolatrous practices. Through its distinctiveness, Israel points others to the one true God. The OT is not expressed in terms of proselytism but through vocation, holiness, and witness. Israel is to live under God's rule, demonstrate His character, and trust in His sovereignty, thereby becoming a visible sign to the nations of who God is and what it means to live in covenant with Him.

The Abrahamic covenant as a foundation for mission

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are foundational figures who receive God's promises and are called to live in ways that reflect His covenantal faithfulness. The Abrahamic covenant, previously introduced as the basis of Israel's election, provides the clearest Old Testament foundation for mission. God's call to Abraham in

11 John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 185–88.

12 John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 452–55.

13 Daniel I. Block, *For the Glory of God: Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 94–97.

Genesis 12:1–3—'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'—sets the trajectory for universal blessing that runs throughout Scripture. Reaffirmed to Isaac and Jacob (Gen 26:3–4; 28:14), this covenant reveals that divine election is instrumental rather than exclusive: Abraham is chosen to mediate God's blessing to all nations. Thus, the covenant moves beyond privilege to vocation, establishing the theological framework for a missionary people through whom God's redemptive purpose unfolds.[14]

This establishes a trajectory that extends to all nations. As Richard Bauckham argues:

> God singles out first Abraham, then Israel, then David. The three movements that begin with these three choices by God each has its own distinctive theme, one aspect of God's purpose for the world. We could call these the thematic trajectories of the narrative. The trajectory that moves from Abraham to all the families of the earth is the trajectory of blessing. The trajectory that moves from Israel to all the nations is the trajectory of God's revelation of himself to the world. The trajectory that moves from God's enthronement of David in Zion to the ends of the earth is the trajectory of rule, of God's kingdom coming in all creation. Of course, these three movements and themes are closely interrelated.[15]

Israel is called a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex 19:5–6), meaning that the entire community was set apart to represent God's character and mediate His presence to the world. As a priestly nation, Israel was to stand between God and the nations, reflecting His holiness, justice, and mercy through their collective life and worship. This underscores the communal nature of Israel's vocation—their mission was not the task of a few individuals but the shared identity and calling of the whole people of God.

As covenant mediators, Israel was commissioned to embody God's holiness and make His character known among the nations. Their distinctiveness—expressed through obedience to divine law, sacrificial worship, and ethical conduct—served as a witness to God's righteousness and mercy. The festivals, sacrificial system, and temple worship functioned not merely as ritual acts but as public testimonies of God's sovereignty. As Avery Willis notes, God's election of Israel was never about privilege but participation in His redemptive mission; their obedience was intended to draw the nations to Him.[16]

Prophetic literature and the universal call

The OT prophetic literature points to God's universal call and redemptive plan for all nations. Isaiah, Jonah, and Micah provide a universal offer of salvation, hope and redemption to all people, regardless of nationality or background. It is characterized by the inclusive nature of God's kingdom, where people from every nation are welcomed into His presence. The emphasis on seeking God's instruction and justice is

14 Fanning, 'Mission in the Old Testament', 3.

15 Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 27.

16 Avery Willis, *The Biblical Basis of Missions* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1979), 33.

the transformative power of His word, which unites people from diverse backgrounds in a common pursuit of righteousness.

Isaiah introduces the concept of the Servant of the Lord, who embodies God's word to bring light to the nations and salvation to the ends of the earth. His assignment expands to include the restoration of Israel and the salvation of all peoples, as he is appointed to be a light to the Gentiles, bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth. According to Bosch, 'The metaphor of light in Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, and elsewhere is particularly appropriate to give expression to both a centripetal and a centrifugal movement. A light shining in the darkness draws people towards it, centripetally, yet at the same time it goes outward, crossing frontiers, allowing, in the words of Isaiah 49:6, God's salvation to reach "to earth's farthest bounds."'[17] Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are sent by God to speak His words to Israel and surrounding nations, demonstrating His concern for all peoples. The laws given to Israel showcase God's wisdom and righteousness to the surrounding nations, prompting them to recognize and honour the Lord.[18]

The prophets also used the experience of exile and the promise of restoration to reinforce God's universal redemptive purposes. For Jeremiah, the call to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city' (Jer 29:4–7) reframed exile as an opportunity for witness among the nations. Similarly, Ezekiel's vision of renewal (Ezek 36:22–28) portrays restoration not merely as national recovery but as the vindication of God's holiness 'among the nations'. These prophetic perspectives reveal that even in judgement and displacement, God's mission continues.[19] Exile thus becomes a stage for demonstrating His sovereignty and faithfulness, integrating Israel's particular story into His universal plan of redemption.

Participation in God's redemptive work, as proclaimed by the prophets, required obedience, faithfulness, and social righteousness. Figures like Isaiah, Micah, and Amos emphasized that true worship must be accompanied by justice and mercy (Mic 6:8; Isa 1:16–17; Amos 5:24). Through their prophetic ministry, they reminded Israel that embodying God's character before the nations was itself a missionary act, revealing the moral dimensions of God's universal mission. Micah's prophetic ministry, in particular, emphasizes the connection between true worship and social justice, advocating for a society that embodies God's standards. His vision of all nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord anticipates the inclusive nature of the gospel, fulfilling the prophecy of a global unity in worship and obedience to God.

Wisdom literature and the inclusion of the Gentiles

While the prophets often proclaimed God's universal purposes in overtly missional terms, the wisdom literature expresses the same reality through the language of moral reflection and daily living. In Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, the

17 D. J. Bosch, 'Witness to the World', in *Perspectives*, ed. Ralph Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 3rd ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 60.

18 Elisha Kwabena Marfo, 'Who Said, No Mission in the Old Testament: A Theological Framework of Mission in the Isaianic Literature', *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 6, no. 4 (2020): 223–35.

19 Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 27.

wisdom of God is portrayed as universal in scope, for all peoples to discern and live by the divine order that sustains creation.

Wisdom literature, particularly the books of Psalms and Proverbs, is a tool for revealing God's universal rule and justice. It offers timeless moral teachings reflecting God's inclusive love that encompasses all peoples and nations. The book of Psalms is widely beloved, containing hymns, prayers, and poems that express a spectrum of human experiences and emotions.[20] Many psalms transcend their immediate historical and cultural context with themes of universal praise and God's sovereign rule over all nations. One recurring theme in the Psalms is the call for all nations and peoples to acknowledge and worship the God of Israel, which is a reflection of God's kingdom that transcends national and ethnic boundaries and the inclusive nature of God's redemptive plan.

Psalm 67 explicitly calls for God's blessings to be recognized among all nations and expresses a universal desire for God's ways and salvation to be known. Psalm 96:1–3 further reveals the global scope of worship, calling on all the earth to sing a new song to the Lord.[21] The eschatology of the Psalms looks forward to a future time when God's reign is fully realized. The book of Proverbs provides practical guidance for living a life with God's principles. Although primarily addressing an Israelite audience, its teachings have a universal appeal, transcending cultural and national boundaries to be applicable to all humanity. The universal principles of wisdom found in Proverbs, such as the universal principles of righteousness, equip one to be an agent of positive change in their lives and nations. Psalms and Proverbs affirm God's universal rule and justice, establishing a foundation for understanding His kingship over all creation. They anticipate and affirm God's redemptive mission, transcending ethnic and cultural barriers. The universal appeal of Proverbs' wisdom is relevant and attractive to people of all backgrounds, and the church's role is to demonstrate the gospel's transformative power in every sphere of society.

The temple as a house of prayer for all nations

The temple represents the intersection of God's covenant with Israel and His universal redemptive purpose. It was designed not merely as a national sanctuary but as a house of prayer for all nations, revealing God's intention to draw every people into worship and fellowship with Him.

The theology of sacred space that culminates in the temple has its roots in the Mosaic covenant. At Sinai, God commanded the building of the tabernacle so that His presence might dwell among His people (Ex 25:8). The temple, therefore, represents the continuation and permanent expression of that same covenantal reality. It was a testament to God's abiding relationship with Israel—a physical structure and sacred space where the divine and human intersected for communion between God and His people. As the epicentre of Israel's worship and sacrificial system, the temple served as the focal point where priests offered sacrifices, interceded for the people, and renewed the nation's covenantal fellowship with God.

20 George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 116.

21 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., 'The Great Commission in the Old Testament', *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13, no. 1 (1996): 5.

Bosch states, 'If there is a missionary in the Old Testament, it is God Himself who will, as his eschatological deed par excellence, bring the nations to Jerusalem to worship him there together with his covenant.'[22] Solomon's dedication prayer in 1 Kings 8:22–53 outlines God's faithfulness to His promises, acknowledging the construction of the temple as a tangible manifestation of His covenant commitment to dwell among His people. Solomon affirms the temple as a sacred dwelling place for God's presence, declaring that 'the heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You' (v. 27), yet God has chosen to dwell among His people. The consecration of the temple sanctifies it as a place where God's glory resides, His name is honoured, and His people can come to seek His face (vv. 28–30).

Significantly, Solomon's prayer is also a form of inclusive worship, where people from all nations are welcomed into the presence of God. He prays that the Lord would hear 'the foreigner who is not of Your people Israel' when they come to pray toward this house, so that 'all peoples of the earth may know Your name' (vv. 41–43). This recognition of the inclusivity of God's redemptive plan foreshadows a reality in which barriers of nationality, ethnicity, and culture will be transcended and all peoples will unite to worship the one true God.

The temple's designation as 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Isa 56:7) builds upon Solomon's dedication prayer in 1 Kings 8, which already envisioned foreigners coming to worship the Lord (1 Kgs 8:41–43). Isaiah later expands this vision, portraying the temple as a symbol of God's universal invitation to all peoples. Both passages anticipate and foreshadow the inclusive scope of God's redemptive plan—His desire that all nations share in His covenant blessings. The imagery underscores God's embrace of diversity within His redemptive purpose and challenges the church today to break down barriers and embody a global community of believers united in worship and fellowship.

Exilic and post-exilic perspectives on mission

The exilic and post-exilic periods mark a significant shift in Israel's perception of mission. Through displacement and restoration, Israel came to realize that God's redemptive purposes were not limited to the land or the temple but extended to all nations, even in the midst of exile. The Babylonian exile was an event in Israel's history that caused a crisis. The destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple, left Israel questioning their relationship with God and their purpose in the world.[23] The loss of Jerusalem, the centre of Israel's religious and political life, left them feeling disconnected from their heritage and uncertain about their future. The exile prompted a crisis of faith due to their apparent abandonment by their covenant God, Yahweh. The prophetic literature associated with the exilic period, reflected in books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, exemplifies this theological struggle. These prophets voiced God's faithfulness amid judgement and displacement, affirming that His redemptive purposes continued even during exile. The prophets sought to reaffirm God's faithfulness and reassure the people of His love and commitment to

22 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 19.

23 D. Jones Muthuyanagom, 'Exilic and Post-Exilic Prophets and Economic Issues', *Voices: From the Third World* 20, no. 1 (June 1997): 58.

His covenant promises.[24] Despite the despair of exile, the prophetic voice of Isaiah proclaimed messages of hope and restoration, that their exile was not the end of God's redemptive plan but a necessary phase in His more purposes. These messages sustained Israel's faith and inspired them to persevere in adversity.

The restoration of Israel to their homeland under the Persian Empire marked a pivotal moment in their history, leading to a renewal and redefinition of their vocation. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah provide a detailed account of this restoration process, focusing on the rebuilding of the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. As Verkuyl observes, Israel's experiences during the seventh and sixth centuries BC opened the people's eyes more fully to God's universal intentions. Although the universal scope of God's mission was already embedded in Israel's covenantal identity, the trauma of exile and subsequent restoration deepened their understanding of how closely their national story was intertwined with the destinies of other nations.[25] The restoration period witnessed a renewed commitment to covenant fidelity among the post-exilic people. The reading of the law by Ezra and the solemn assembly led by Nehemiah exhibited Israel's desire to reestablish their covenant relationship with God. They confessed their sins and acknowledged God's faithfulness, committing themselves to obedience and righteousness. This spiritual renewal was foundational to Israel as a holy nation, called to God's character and purposes to the surrounding nations.

New Testament fulfilment of Old Testament mission themes

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 stands as Jesus' mandate for His disciples to extend the message of the gospel to all nations. This mandate fulfils numerous OT themes that together form the foundation of the NT's understanding of mission. The promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 serves as one of these foundational stones, expressing God's intention to bless all nations through his descendants—a purpose that reaches its fulfilment in the Great Commission. Through this continuity, the NT does not introduce a new mission but builds upon the redemptive structure already established in the Old. In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus' directive to His disciples is 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations', with the promise that all nations will be blessed through Abraham's seed. This continuity is God's desire to bless all peoples through the lineage of Abraham, now realized in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Kaiser asserts:

> There are three basic texts that make it clear that God did commission Israel to go to the Gentiles. These are: Genesis 12:1–3, Exodus 19:4–6, and Psalm 67. These three texts are so basic to our understanding of the missionary mandate that God had designed for the whole nation of Israel that it is impossible to view the Old Testament fairly without treating these texts in their missionary context. In the plan and purpose of God, Israel had always been responsible for com-

24 Eileen Schuller, *Post-Exilic Prophets* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 14.

25 J. Verkuyl, 'The Biblical Foundation for the Worldwide Mission Mandate', in *Perspectives*, ed. Ralph Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 3rd ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 28.

> municating the message of God's grace to the nations. Israel was meant to be a communicating nation.[26]

The concept of Israel as a light to the nations is a central theme in the OT, particularly in Isaiah 49:6. This vision prefigures the New Testament's mandate and establishes continuity between Israel's vocation and the church's mission. Significantly, the same verse is applied to the apostle Paul and his companions in Acts 13:47, indicating that the early church understood its missionary calling as an extension of Israel's and Christ's servant role. The Old Testament foundations for this mission include Isaiah's universal vision, the Psalms' call to global praise, the Abrahamic covenant, and the fulfilment of these promises in Jesus as the ultimate Servant. The Great Commission continues this trajectory by instructing disciples to teach all that Christ commanded, including the prophetic imperatives of justice, mercy, and humility. Thus, the church's mission is holistic, addressing both spiritual and social dimensions of God's redemptive plan.

However, the Old Testament understanding of mission is predominantly *centripetal*—a movement in which the nations are drawn toward Israel and its God through the witness of Israel's covenantal life, rather than by Israel actively crossing boundaries to reach others. Israel was primarily focused inwardly, defined by its covenant relationship with YHWH, who chose them as His special possession to represent His holiness, justice, and mercy among the nations (Ex 19:5–6; Deut 4:5–8). This understanding supports Bosch's view that 'there is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of the old covenant being sent by God to cross geographical, religious and social frontiers in order to win others to faith in Yahweh.'[27] Israel's was primarily expressed in its distinct life, marked by Torah obedience, rather than in explicit evangelistic activity directed outward.

This predominantly centripetal orientation does not entirely exclude *centrifugal* moments in the OT. Wright argues that Israel's election was in purpose, in the promise to Abraham that 'all families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen 12:3).[28] Kaiser similarly suggests the centrifugal potential of Israel's call, suggesting that Israel was meant to be actively involved in proclaiming YHWH's name among the nations.[29] However, the views of Wright and Kaiser diverge in the degree of outward attribution to Israel. Their contrasting emphases—centripetal in Wright's framing and centrifugal in Kaiser's—create a tension.

James Okoye offers a helpful way to navigate this apparent contradiction. He proposes that Israel's orientation shifted throughout different phases of its history.[30] In periods of national strength, such as under David and Solomon, one may detect a more centripetal impulse—drawing the nations toward Zion, particularly through temple worship and royal wisdom (cf. 1 Kgs 10:1–9; Ps 67; Isa 2:2–4). In contrast, the prophetic literature, especially during times of judgement and exile, exhibits a

---

26 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 11.

27 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 18.

28 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 200–205.

29 Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament*, 11–15.

30 James Chukwuma Okoye, *Israel and the Nations: A Mission Theology of the Old Testament* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 47–55.

more centrifugal tendency, where Israel's dispersion among the nations and the universal claims of YHWH anticipate a divine engagement with the world (e.g. Isa 49:6; Jonah 4:11). Thus, the tension between centripetal and centrifugal need not be resolved in favour of one over the other but can be understood as something develops through Israel's unfolding history. Despite these glimpses of universal concern, Israel as a nation did not consistently live out the full scope of God's redemptive purpose. The tension between centripetal and centrifugal models of mission is therefore both prescriptive and descriptive: prescriptively, God intended Israel's covenantal life to attract the nations while also bearing witness to them; descriptively, Israel's repeated disobedience and inward focus limited this outward movement. Fanning notes that although God purposed to bless all nations through Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12:1–3; 18:18–19; 22:15–18), the tragedy is that 'Israel did not share the same heart for the world.'[31] This lack of missionary impulse represents not a flaw in God's design but a discontinuity between divine intention and Israel's historical practice.

The OT prophets foretold the coming of a Messiah who would bring redemption and salvation to Israel and the world. Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled these prophetic expectations in remarkable ways, bringing to fruition the hopes and dreams of Israel through his life, teachings, death, and resurrection. His ministry is characterized by miracles, teachings, and acts of compassion, in accordance with the messianic descriptions found in the OT. Jesus' sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection are the climactic events in God's plan of redemption. Through His death on the cross, Jesus atones for the sins of humanity, fulfilling the sacrificial system of the OT and opening the way for reconciliation between God and humanity. The Great Commission, given by the risen Christ to His disciples, represents the fulfilment of these prophetic expectations and serves as the capstone of His earthly ministry, that His redemptive work would continue through the proclamation of the Gospel to the ends of the earth:

> The newness of the New Testament centres on Jesus Christ. Jesus, however, is linked with the Old Testament and based his teaching upon the Law and Prophets. The Commission embodies this newness while retaining the heritage of the Old Testament teaching and practice. The Commission, especially the Matthew rendition, reflects an Old Testament precedence, particularly from Isaiah. The paradigm shift, therefore, takes place with the advent of Jesus in the New Testament.[32]

The OT consistently presents a universal horizon in God's redemptive plan, revealing His concern for all nations from the earliest stages of Israel's story. Even in the Torah, the Egyptians witnessed God's power through the plagues, and a 'mixed multitude' departed Egypt with Israel (Ex 7–12; 12:38). Israel's vocation was thus never purely national; the covenant always carried a missionary dimension intended to bless the nations (Deut 4:6–8). Later, prophetic passages such as Isaiah 56 and Amos

31 Buist M. Fanning, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 107.

32 Roger Hedlund, 'Mission Paradigms in the Old Testament', *Indian Journal of Theology* 39, no. 1 (1997): 26.

9:11–12 further developed this trajectory, anticipating a time when God's salvation would embrace all peoples. In the NT, this divine intention reaches its fulfilment through the ministry of Jesus and the expansion of the early church.

According to Bauckham, the OT and NT are intertwined, with Jesus being the descendant of Abraham and the embodiment of God's rule over all.[33] Jesus assumes that Israel's destiny is to be a light to all nations and the new, ideal David. His particularity also reveals his universality, as the NT is centred on Jesus and speaks of his universal relevance. The church that recognizes Jesus in these terms is called to be a universal witness. As followers of Jesus, the church is caught up in the movement of God's purpose from one to all, never singled out for their own sake. The church is the source from which the blessing of Abraham, experienced in Jesus, overflows to others. It is composed of people who recognize God as revealed in Jesus and make that revelation known to others. The church acknowledges God's rule as He implements it in Jesus, and it lives for others in the light of His kingdom's coming in all creation.

Implications for contemporary Christian missions

The OT's witness to God's universal purpose provides essential insights for shaping the church's participation in mission today. God's redemptive activity throughout Israel's history reveals principles of calling, covenant, and witness that remain instructive for the contemporary church. These biblical patterns show that God's people have always been called to embody His character before the nations and to make His name known among them.

First, the exodus of Israel from Egypt was a divine act of salvation designed to make God's name renowned among the nations. God promised Israel that they would be His treasured possession and serve as a witness to the nations (Ex 19:4–6). He revealed Himself as the one true God over all the earth, whom the nations must acknowledge (Ex 9:16; 2 Sam 7:23; Neh 9:10; Ps 106:8; Isa 63:10, 12; Jer 32:20; Dan 9:15).[34] The OT reveals God's universal sovereignty, His rule over all nations, and His desire for all people to know Him (Ps 47:2; Isa 2:2–4).

This biblical pattern of God revealing His power and glory through His people provides a vital framework for contemporary mission. Just as God made His name known among the nations through Israel's deliverance, missionaries today are called to demonstrate His character through acts of justice, mercy, and faithful witness. Integrating this theology of revelation into outreach encourages inclusivity and builds genuine understanding within diverse cultural contexts. To communicate the gospel effectively, missionaries must engage with local cultures respectfully, valuing their languages, traditions, and communal structures as potential vehicles for expressing biblical truth. However, this process requires theological discernment. The long-standing debate between contextualization and syncretism reminds us that the gospel must be translated meaningfully into every culture without losing its essential message or moral integrity. True contextualization involves listening deeply to the host culture while allowing Scripture to remain the ultimate norm that critiques and

33 Bauckham, *Bible and Mission*, 48.

34 Bauckham, *Bible and Mission,* 36–37.

transforms every human worldview. In this way, the Christian faith both affirms what is good in every culture and challenges what contradicts God's universal sovereignty.

Second, the OT reveals that justice, mercy, and righteousness are not peripheral values but essential expressions of God's covenantal character. Israel was called to embody these virtues so that the nations might see God's holiness reflected in their communal life (Mic 6:8; Isa 1:16–17; Amos 5:24). This ethical witness formed a central dimension of Israel's mission and remains foundational for the church's engagement with the world today. Consequently, contemporary mission must integrate social-justice initiatives with evangelistic efforts to embody the gospel's transformative power fully. Addressing societal issues such as poverty, inequality, and human rights should be seen as essential expressions of the gospel—manifestations of God's heart for justice and mercy. Missionaries operationalize this by engaging in holistic ministry approaches that respond to both spiritual and physical needs. These may include initiatives promoting sustainable development, education, healthcare, and economic empowerment. They should also work to combat systemic injustices such as human trafficking, racial discrimination, and exploitation by partnering with local organizations, advocating for policy changes, and supporting victims. Acts of compassion such as food distribution, medical care, and shelter offer tangible demonstrations of Christ's love and the righteousness of God's kingdom, in which justice and mercy are inseparable from holiness.

Third, mission ultimately finds its fulfilment in worship. Throughout the OT, the vision of the nations joining Israel in the praise of God anticipates the global worship of the redeemed community (Ps 67:3–5; Isa 2:2–4; 56:6–7). The goal of mission, therefore, is not merely cultural inclusion but the gathering of all peoples to glorify God. In this sense, worship is both the motivation and the end of missionary activity—God's people are sent so that His name might be known and adored among the nations. Contemporary missionaries should help to cultivate worshipping communities that reflect this eschatological vision—diverse yet united in exalting God's sovereignty. Training and empowering local leaders to shape worship in their own languages and artistic forms ensures authenticity and sustainability while maintaining fidelity to Scripture. Such worship becomes a living testimony to the reconciling power of the gospel, previewing the global, multiethnic fellowship envisioned in Revelation 7:9–10.

Fourth, the experience of exile and restoration in Israel reveals that God's mission advances even amid disruption and change. The exilic period forced Israel to reimagine its identity, deepen its faith, and bear witness to God's sovereignty beyond geographic and cultural boundaries (Jer 29:4–7; Ezek 36:22–28). This pattern offers a powerful paradigm for the church in today's rapidly changing world. Contemporary mission must therefore cultivate resilience and adaptability, being prepared to learn, reform, and respond creatively to shifting cultural, social, and political realities. As Christopher Wright observes, we now live in an era of a 'multinational church and multidirectional mission',[35] which calls for humility and openness in interpreting and living out the gospel within diverse contexts. Missionaries who

35 Wright, *The Mission of God*, 18.

embrace this exilic posture of faithful flexibility learn to depend on God's presence rather than on fixed structures or methods. In doing so, they embody the redemptive hope that characterized Israel's restoration, participating in God's ongoing renewal of all creation.

Fifth, the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20 mandates the making of disciples and the teaching of obedience to all that Jesus commanded. This imperative has its practical roots in the OT's emphasis on transmitting God's law, wisdom, and covenantal expectations from one generation to another (Deut 6:4–9; Ps 78:1–8). Teaching and discipleship, therefore, are not innovations of the NT but are grounded in the covenantal rhythms of Israel's religious life. Patrick D. Miller Jr. observes that in the OT,

> the praise of God is always devotion that tells about God, that is theology, and proclamation that seeks to draw others into the circle of those who worship this God, that is testimony for conversion. … Perhaps less clear in the minds of many readers of the Old Testament is the fact that the praise of God is the most prominent and extended formulation of the universal and conversionary dimension of the theology of the Old Testament. One might even speak of a missionary aim if that did not risk distorting the material by suggesting a program of proselytising to bring individuals into the visible community of Israel. That is not the case. But what blossoms and flourishes in the New Testament proclamation of the Gospel to convert all persons to discipleship to Jesus Christ is anticipated in the Old Testament's proclamation of the goodness and grace of God.[36]

Miller's insight suggests that effective discipleship is not an NT innovation but the continuation of a trajectory in Israel's praise and proclamation of YHWH. This impulse is further evidenced in narratives where non-Israelites respond to revelation with repentance and faith in Israel's God.

Narratives of individual Gentile inclusion further support this pattern. Ruth, a Moabite, forsakes her ancestral gods and confesses her allegiance to YHWH, becoming part of the Davidic line (Ruth 1:16–17; 4:13–22). Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute, acknowledges the power of YHWH, protects the Israelite spies, and is incorporated into Israel's covenant (Josh 2:9–11; 6:25). Naaman, a Syrian military commander, seeks healing from the God of Israel and responds with faith, vowing to worship no other god but YHWH (2 Kgs 5:15–17). These accounts illustrate personal transformation by Israel's God and provide a narrative foundation for understanding the nature of conversion and discipleship in the Old Testament.

Sixth, the prophetic witness is a missionary model for speaking truth to power and advocating for marginalized groups. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos were religious leaders who challenged injustice and called for righteousness. Wright asserts that the prophets understood that God's actions among nations were for the benefit of Israel and his covenant people but also benefitted the nations. This dual reality preserves God's sovereignty over all nations while acknowledging his unique relationship with Israel. God's providential reign is related to his redemptive purpose for his people, while his redemptive work is related to his missionary purpose among the nations.

---

36 Patrick D. Miller Jr., '"Enthroned on the Praises of Israel": The Praise of God in Old Testament Theology', *Interpretation* 39 (1985): 9.

Since the God of Isaiah and Ezekiel is still our God, we must consider thoughtfully the world of international affairs and contemplate whether the church is properly engaging in its biblical calling of bringing God's blessings to the nations.[37]

Conclusion

The Great Commission is not a sudden or isolated command found only in the NT, but rather the culmination of God's eternal redemptive purpose revealed progressively through the OT. From the call of Abraham to be a blessing to all nations, to Israel's identity as a kingdom of priests, to the prophecy of a light shining to the ends of the earth, the OT consistently points towards God's universal mission. The temple as a house of prayer for all nations, the exile and restoration experiences, the inclusion of Gentiles in Israel's story, and the ethical demands for justice and mercy all testify to a God whose sovereignty and salvation extend beyond national and cultural boundaries. In Jesus Christ, these OT trajectories find their ultimate fulfilment. The Servant's role as light to the nations becomes embodied in His life, death, and resurrection and is extended through the church as His chosen instrument to disciple the nations. The NT, therefore, does not discard the OT's vision but amplifies and globalizes it.

37 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Ezekiel: A New Heart and a New Spirit* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 260.

ERT (2025) 49:2, 175–190

Christ Is the Owner of Haaretz

Yohanna Katanacho

Abstract: *This article deals with the statement, "God gave the Land to Israel," by first deconstructing it through three critical questions: What are the borders of the Land in the Bible? Who is Israel in the Bible? And how does God give something to someone? This deconstruction addresses the theological and sociopolitical challenges inherent in this statement. Following this critique, the article seeks to provide a comprehensive biblical theology of the land (Haaretz), integrating the perspectives of both the Old and New Testaments and emphasizing the centrality and lordship of Jesus Christ. It is particularly concerned to show how Christ's absolute ownership provides a balanced and just framework for understanding the people, the land, and the future hope within Palestinian contextual theology.*

Introduction

In the Middle East, many Muslims interpret Western actions as Christian acts. This interpretation is partly rooted in the history of Christian-Muslim relations, especially during the era of the crusaders, and partly in an Islamic ideology that joins religion and politics.[1] Consequently, whenever Muslims are troubled by Westerners, there will be Islamic voices that question the loyalty of local Christians.[2] The latter will be compelled to clarify their biblical beliefs, demonstrating that the God of the Bible does not despise Muslims and is not trying to take away their lands. The Islamic view of Western interest in Israel, namely, that Western support for the state of Israel indicates the standard of justice in Christianity, only intensifies the need for local Christians to clarify their Christian beliefs. An essential part of that clarification concerns the biblical theology of the land. Such a theology will continue to have a deep influence on Christian-Muslim dialogue, both in the Middle East and also in the West. In this essay, I will analyze popular doctrines concerning the ownership of

Yohanna Katanacho (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) serves as the Academic Dean at Nazareth Evangelical College. He holds degrees from Bethlehem University (B.Sc.), Wheaton College (M.A.), and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (M.Div.). Professor Katanacho is an Old Testament scholar, well-known for his significant contributions to Palestinian contextual theology. He has taught at Christian colleges and seminaries worldwide and has authored or contributed to dozens of books and hundreds of articles in Arabic and English; Rev. Katanacho has recently translated the Greek New Testament into Colloquial Galilean Arabic. Email: yohanna@nazcol.org.

1 It is important to note that much of the Islamic world does not separate mosque and state. Thus theology is political and politics is theological. See for example the monograph of A. L. Tibawi. *Jerusalem: Its Place in Islam and Arab History* (Beirut: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 1969).

2 For a detailed study of the history of Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East, see Atallah Mansour, *Narrow Gate Churches: The Christian Presence in the Holy Land under Muslim and Jewish Rule* (Pasadena, CA: Hope Publishing House, 2004).

Haaretz[3] and then re-present the biblical teachings throughout salvation-history. By "popular doctrines," I refer specifically to theologies that promote giving Haaretz to the state of Israel.

A theology that promotes giving Haaretz to Israel

Many North American Christians have come to believe that modern Israel is more theologically significant than other states. This belief is embedded in dispensational theologies, in which the distinction between Israel and the church is nonetheless crucial.[4] In fact, some see it as the essence of dispensationalism.[5] A brief summary of the rise of dispensationalism will help us clarify the roots of such a belief.[6]

John Darby (1800–1882), the father of dispensationalism, made a clear distinction between Israel and the church, and established a strict dichotomy between two peoples.[7] He argued that Israel is an earthly people who are promised a material and worldly kingdom, while the largely Gentile church is a spiritual people who are promised a heavenly kingdom.[8] Darby's theology was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible that first appeared in 1909 and more recently by the Ryrie Study Bible, especially its expanded edition in 1994. While contemporary dispensationalists would disagree with many of the details of Darby's argument, they also assert the need to maintain a distinction between Israel and the church.[9] They see that many Old Testament promises that were made to ethnic Israel will be fulfilled in the future in an earthly kingdom, thus following the literal hermeneutics that Darby advocated. In short, throughout its history, dispensationalism taught an earthly/heavenly dualism between Israel and the church, promoting two different programs in God's purposes, one for the church and another for Israel. In Israel's program, Haaretz is deemed crucial. In the words of Lewis Chafer (1871–1952), the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, "Israel can never be blessed apart from her land."[10]

---

3 The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* clarifies that "the two common English designations 'Promised Land' and 'Holy Land' though correctly expressing central theological concerns, are not characteristic of the Old Testament." W. Janzen, "Land," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 144. Thus I prefer to use the word Haaretz ("land") even though it has many limitations. At least, it is not loaded theologically and it is not anachronistic. I provide a careful study of the word's scriptural meanings in the first section of this article, "What Are the Territorial Dimensions of Israel's Land?" I also discuss its theological meanings in the section titled "The Meanings of Haaretz."

4 Sizer provides a helpful introduction for the diversity within dispensationalism. Stephen Sizer, "Dispensational Approaches to the Land", in *The Land of Promise*, ed. Philip Johnston and Peter Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 142–171.

5 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 47.

6 Some scholars argue that dispensationalism or its roots can be traced back as early as the early church. See for example Arnold Ehlert, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), 6. However, this claim is anachronistic and ignores some of the unprecedented claims of dispensationalism, for example, the rapture theory that promotes two second-comings, a secretive Parousia followed by a public one.

7 Dallas Kreider, "Darby, John Nelson," in *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (London: Routledge, 2004), 550.

8 Ibid., 550.

9 Larry Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 205.

10 Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 323.

A few decades after Chafer, a more progressive dispensationalism developed, questioning its hermeneutical and theological heritage. It differed with traditional dispensationalists over the distinctions between Israel and the church, including the earthly/heavenly dualism.[11] Nevertheless, both branches assert that national Israel has a future role on her land because of her unconditional, divinely bestowed privileges and promises for her restored life on this earth.[12]

These dispensational beliefs gave theological support for the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and its preservation in the following decades. Popular writers like Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye influenced American public opinion about Israel in unprecedented ways. They provided a prophetic lens for interpreting the whole world in light of the political events of the state of Israel. Its establishment became for many the most important event since Christ's ascension.[13] Some televangelists further popularized this theology to teach that to stand against Israel in this earthly history is to stand against God.[14] In brief, many Western Christians assume today that God gave Israel her land, an assumption that gives religious support to the West's political stance on the Middle East. But this assumption requires further probing: (1) What do we mean by "*her land*" or Haaretz? (2) Who is *Israel*? (3) How did *God give* Israel Haaretz?

What are the territorial dimensions of Israel's land?

Defining modern Israel's borders based on the Bible is difficult because the Bible gives a variety of different borders. In the Pentateuch alone, we encounter at least three different borders (Gen 15:18–20; Num 34:1–12; Deut 11:24; cf. Josh 1:3, 13–19).[15] The northern and eastern boundaries are strikingly different. Recognizing these territorial differences, Kallai suggests three possibilities, namely, Haaretz^{Patriarchal}, Haaretz^{Canaan}, and Haaretz^{Israel}.[16] He argues that Haaretz^{Patriarchal}, that is, the land between Egypt and Mesopotamia, including the nomadic desert fringe, is the core of the covenantal land; Haaretz^{Canaan} is the Promised Land; and Haaretz^{Israel} is the realization of this promise. The following map visually demonstrates the territorial differences between Haaretz^{Canaan} and Haaretz^{Israel}.

Haaretz^{Canaan} (surrounded by a dark black line) includes parts of modern Lebanon and Syria, while Haaretz^{Israel} (covered by horizontal lines) has territories in Transjordan outside Haaretz^{Canaan}. It includes a bigger part of modern Jordan. Last,

11 For a helpful discussion see J. Lanier Burns, "Israel and the Church of a Progressive Dispensationalist," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. Herbert Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 263–303.

12 See, for example, the doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary, article XX. Dallas has both classical and progressive dispensationalists on its faculty. All must subscribe to the pertinent statement of faith. Dallas Theological Seminary, accessed on July 28, 2004, available from http://www.dts.edu/aboutdts/fulldoctrinalstatement.aspx. [Editor's note: The current version from 2022 has no substantive changes in article XX and is available at https://www.dts.edu/2022-dts-doctrinal-statement-strengthening/#parallel]

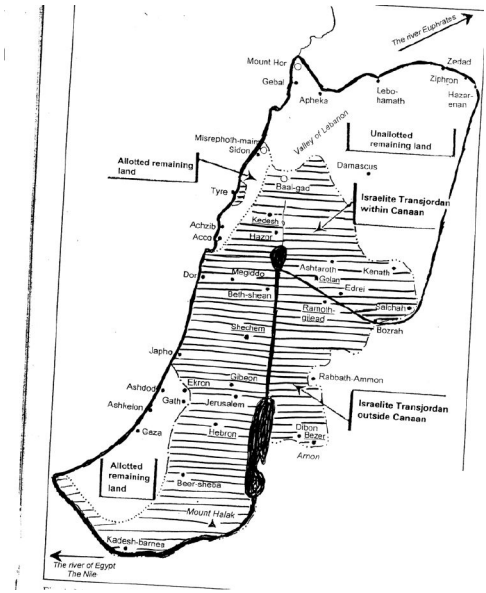
13 Jerry Falwell, "The Twenty-First Century and the End of the World," *Fundamentalism Journal* 7 (May 1988): 10–11.

14 Jerry Falwell, *Listen America* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1980), 215.

15 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

16 Zecharia Kallai. "The Patriarchal Boundaries, Canaan and the Land of Israel: Patterns and Application in Biblical Historiography," *Israel Exploration Journal* 47 (1997): 70.

we observe lands with blank spaces pointing to remaining lands not occupied by ancient Israelites even though some of them were allotted to certain tribes.



Jeffrey Townsend had earlier suggested that there are general descriptions of Haaretz (Gen 15:18; Ex 23:31; Num 13:21; Deut 11:24; 1 Kgs 8:65; 2 Kgs 14:25) and specific descriptions (Num 34:1–12; Josh 15:1–12; Ezek 47:15–20).[17] He adds that these two options are not contradictory because the wider borders are only general and variable approximations. There is a distinction between Haaretz of the Israelites' residence and Haaretz where they exercise sovereignty. Moshe Weinfeld finds yet another explanation for these territorial differences, based on the documentary hypothesis.[18] He believes that the Transjordanian region is promised to Israel and cites the following evidence. Chapters 1–3 of Deuteronomy consider it a part of the land promised to Israel; the Israelites implemented the total ban or the utter destruction of every creature in Transjordan (Deut 2:34–35; 3:6–7; 20:10), just as they did in the other parts they occupied; and God showed it to Moses as part of the promised land (Deut. 34:1–4).

In my opinion, none of these explanations is satisfactory. Kallai lacks sufficient textual support for his tripartite division of Haaretz. Townsend downplays the huge territorial differences in Haaretz, especially the northern and eastern dimensions; and Weinfeld ignores the present *textus receptus*, underestimating the intelligentsia of ancient Israel. Having said that, it is important to assert that these scholars have rightly highlighted the territorial diversity of Haaretz in the Old Testament, challenging any notion of fixed borders. Unfortunately, they have not paid sufficient attention to the theological framework of Haaretz, namely, God's redemptive plan for the whole world, what we might call Haaretz^{Global}.

17 Jeffrey L. Townsend. "Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (1985): 320–337.

18 The German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) advocated this hypothesis. He believed that the Pentateuch comes from four independent literary sources that are identified as J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomist), and P (Priestly). For further details, consult Moshe Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land: The Inheritance of Canaan by the Israelites* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 52–75.

Who is Israel?

As we can see in the work of Kallai, Townsend, and Weinfeld, formulating clear criteria for the content and markers of Israel's identity is extremely difficult. This work is made more difficult still when the label "Israel" is affixed, as some prominent Christians have done, to both the state of Israel and biblical Israel. Such equivocality is not only anachronistic but also overlooks important complexities, sacrificing Israel's diachronic meanings for the sake of a fixed synchronic understanding of what gets called national Israel. The following two examples should illustrate this point.[19] First, John Walvoord described the return of millions of Jews to *their ancient land*, the *restoration* of national Israel in 1948, and its expansion in 1967 as fulfillments of prophecy.[20] In his opinion, the establishment of the state of Israel is one of the most remarkable prophetic fulfillments since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.,[21] and its preservation is a clear sign of divine blessing.[22]

Second, on November 1, 1977, the *New York Times* had a full-page ad headed "Evangelicals' Concern for Israel," signed by many influential evangelicals, including Hudson Armerding, W. A. Criswell, John Walvoord, and Kenneth Kantzer. It read (in part):

> We the undersigned evangelical Christians affirm our belief in the right of Israel to exist … we, along, with most evangelicals, understand the Jewish homeland generally to include the territory west of the Jordan River … [W]e would view with grave concern any effort to carve out of the historic Jewish homeland another nation or political entity, particularly one which would be governed by terrorists … The time has come for Evangelical Christians to affirm their belief in biblical prophecy and Israel's Divine Right to the Land by speaking now. [23]

Both of these illustrations assume continuity between biblical Israel and the state of Israel.

But there are better arguments for the multiple meanings of "Israel" in both Testaments. As Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad has shown, we find a plurality of meanings already in the Old Testament.[24] During the lifetime of Jacob, Israel denoted Jacob (Gen 32:28), his children (Gen 34:7), and his tribe (Gen 47:27; 49:28). During the lifetime of Moses, it referred to the descendants of Jacob's tribe (Ex 1:7). During the lifetime of Joshua and the period of Judges, it may refer to Jacob's descendants except the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh (Josh

19 A long list of illustrations can be found in the impressive work of Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 80–112.

20 Walvoord was the president of Dallas Theological Seminary from 1952 to 1986. John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies: 37 Crucial Prophecies That Affect You Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 70.

21 Ibid., 7, 71–72, 319.

22 John F. Walvoord, "The Amazing Rise of Israel," *Moody Monthly* (Oct 1967): 22.

23 This quotation can be found in Paul Charles Merkley, *Christian Attitudes towards the State of Israel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 167–68.

24 Gerhard von Rad, "Israel, Judah, and Hebrews in the Old Testament," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 356–58.

22:11), or it may point to Jacob's descendants except Benjamin (Judg 20:35). During the united kingdom and before the fall of Samaria, it may exclude the men of Judah (1 Sam 17:52; 18:16), may represent Absalom's men who rebelled against David (2 Sam 17:24), or may stand for the northern kingdom. After the fall of the northern kingdom, many prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel used it to refer to all the followers of Yahweh. During the period of Ezra-Nehemiah, however, this inclusive approach faced several challenges when membership in Israel was defined by lineage.

In short, the Old Testament data demonstrates the accuracy of von Rad's claim. The New Testament also includes a plurality of meanings. "Israel" might designate God's people who are led by a shepherd from Bethlehem (Matt 2:6), or a land (Matt 2:20), or the twelve tribes judged by the twelve apostles (Matt 19:12), or the Jews and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Acts 2:22), or an ethnic group (Rom 9:4), or the followers of God (Rom 9:6; cf. Eph 2:11–22).

Biblically, the label "Israel" has many meanings and is distinct from the label "Hebrew," or "Jew." A person could be a Hebrew but not Jewish or Israelite—for example, Abraham.[25] One could be a member of Israel and a Hebrew without being Jewish—for example, Samuel.[26] One could be Jewish but not an Israelite or Hebrew—for example, Antiochus the Macedonian king (2 Macc 9:17). A person could be enfranchised into the household of Israel and could become Jewish but not be a Hebrew or a descendant of Jacob—for example, Achior the Ammonite (Judith

25 The word "Hebrew" occurs 47 times in the Bible. It refers to a language or to a non-exclusive ethnic group and it could also refer to a social class such as strangers or foreigners. Most likely, its meaning must allow a connection to one or more of the following: (1) Eber (Gen 10:24), (2) Abraham, and/or (3) the Habiru/Apiru. All these options broaden the identity of this group beyond the children of Jacob and their descendants, encouraging us to see "Hebrew" as a fluid term, not a rigid label. This fluidity helps us to understand that the Old Testament texts (1) call Abram a Hebrew (Gen 14:13), (2) call the land of which Joseph was taken as the land of the Hebrews even though the children of Jacob were only 70 people (Gen 40:15, 46:26), (3) describe the existence of a group called Hebrews even though they were not counted with all the men of Israel (1 Sam 14:21–22), and at the same time (4) define Jonah's identity as Hebrew (Jon 1:9).

26 The term "Jew" occurs 91 times in the Old Testament. It was used for the first time in 2 Kings 16:6, and thus it is arguably later than the labels Hebrew or Israel. At first, it was used to denote the inhabitants of Judah and their children. This definition was broadened as more followers of Yahweh started coming to Jerusalem, especially during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chr 30). At that time, the inhabitants of the southern kingdom developed an inclusive attitude centered on their religious identity. By the times of Jeremiah, the term "Jew" included groups living in Moab, Ammon, Edom, and those carried to Babylonia (Jer 40:11; 52:28–30). By the times of Esther, it could have been radically redefined in certain circles to denote anyone, regardless of ethnicity, who joins the people of Yahweh and shares their faith. The book of Esther uses a Hithpa'el form of the pertinent term to state that many nations became Jews during the times of Esther. It reads, *wərabbîm mēʿammê hāʾāreṣ mitəyahădîm* (Esth 8:17).

Moreover, the word "Jew" in the New Testament occurs 199 times with a spectrum of nuances even within one epistle or book. For example, it could mean: the Jews who did not accept the resurrection of Christ (Matt 28:15); or devout followers of Judaism from many nations (Acts 2:5); or a group who belong to a certain ethnos (Acts 10:22); or Christians who were Jewish (Acts 21:39), or the followers of Christ (cf. Rom 2:28; Rev 2:9; 3:9). In short, it is important to explore the meanings of the term in every period of time and throughout biblical times. It is equally important to reflect on the reasons behind a wide spectrum of meanings before formulating a prophetic conclusion concerning Jews in the twenty-first century who themselves are divided on defining Jewishness.

14:10). In other words, the labels "Israel," "Jew," and "Hebrew" are not identical, and perhaps it is unwise to assume that the promises given to the Hebrews are transferred to the Israelites and later to the Jews without providing sufficient biblical support. These distinctions between Israel, Hebrew, and Jew are important, but we are still left with the conundrum of Israel's identity. How can we understand the markers and content of Israel's ethnicity? What makes a person a member of Israel? Is it lineage, religion, geography, culture, a combination of these elements, or something else?

A look at Old Testament practices may be helpful. Although the descendants of Jacob preferred tribal intermarriages, they were not a closed group. In fact, we have several males from the descendants of Jacob who married foreigners. Judah married a Canaanite wife (Gen 38; 1 Chr 2:3). Joseph married an Egyptian (Gen 41:45). Simeon married a Canaanite (Gen 46:10). Moses married a Midianite (Ex 2:21–22). Solomon married many foreign wives (1 Kgs 11:1–3). These intermarriages were not limited to the well-known, for we are told in the book of Judges that many of the descendants of Jacob had foreign wives (Judg 3:6). Are their children full members of Israel? Did these wives offer any cultural contributions to Israel's identity?

Further, we have females from the descendants of Jacob who married foreign men. Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri the Danite, married an Egyptian (Lev 24: 10–12). A Nephtalite woman married a Phoenician man, giving birth to Hiram (1 Kgs 7:13–14), a prominent biblical figure known for his contributions to building the first Temple during Solomon's era. To further complicate the issue, we have children who belong to a certain pedigree but are partially foreign to that lineage. This was common among several ancient Near Eastern peoples.[27] However, it acquired different nuances in the Bible. We see it not only in the story of Abraham and his son Ishmael (Gen 16), but also in the story of Judah who asked his second son to raise up a child for his dead brother, an offspring from a sperm that belongs to the living brother but legally belongs to the dead brother (Gen 38:8–9). This concept of sonship or of legal belonging can also be seen in Exodus 21:3–4, where a fellow Israelite marries a bondwoman and produces children who belong to the household of his master (cf. Deut 15:12; Jer 34:9, 14).[28] It also extends to foreign slaves. When a foreign slave marries an Israelite woman, their children belong to the household of her father and bear his patronym (1 Chr 2:34–35).[29]

In short, borrowing Ezra's language, we can see that the "holy seed" has mingled with many nations (Ez 9:2) and many cannot prove their pedigrees (Ez 2:59; Neh 7:61, 64). If difficult then, how today would we define the ancestral markers or content of the descendants of Jacob? Would we define a member of Israel by their patrilineal, matrilineal, or bilateral lineage? Would we look for purity, or would one drop of the blood of Jacob's descendants be sufficient for accepting a person as a

27 Some examples could be seen in Hammurabi's Code §146, or Nuzi or Neo-Assyrian texts. For further details, see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 444–45.

28 Nahum Sarna, *Exodus*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 119.

29 Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 84.

member of Israel? What about the foreigners who joined the membership of Israel? Would Ruth, the great-grandmother of Jesus, and her descendants receive the promises—the same Ruth whose grandchild David became one of Israel's greatest leaders? And lest one think that Ruth is an exception, consider Rahab (Josh 6:25) or the 32,000 Midianite virgins (Num 31:35). These virgins became mothers in Israel.[30]

In short, perhaps Israel's DNA is not the determining factor for choosing who inherits Haaretz. We should seriously contemplate the claim that God can raise up children of Abraham out of stones (Matt 3:9; cf. John 8:37–39). Having a Gentile-free lineage does not mean being a true Israelite. Otherwise the identity of Jesus himself would be questioned for he had several Gentile great-grandmothers (cf. Matt 1). Moreover, would Jesus, who has a Jewish mother without a Jewish father, be considered a full member of Israel with full rights? In the final analysis, could it be that not all those who claim a physical connection with Jacob are true Israelites (cf. Rom 9:6)?

How did God give Israel Haaretz?

Some Christians argue that the state of Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. God gave her Haaretz. But what about many biblical passages that teach that Israel must obey God in order to dwell in Haaretz and replace the wicked peoples who provoked his holy anger (cf. Deut 28:58–68, 30:15–20, Josh 23:12–16; Ezek 33:21–29)? These passages picture a situation in which we have an obedient occupying party and a wicked dispossessed party. If the new inhabitants disobey God, then they will be scattered among the nations. Only those who repent will come back, for no one can legitimately be in Haaretz unless they are in harmony with God. Disobeying God, the northern kingdom lost her land in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom lost her land for similar reasons in 587 B.C. Only those who repented returned.

To further illustrate this biblical teaching, let us consider one textual example, Ezekiel 33:21–29. In v. 24, God informs Ezekiel that some argue, "Abraham was one person and he inherited Haaretz but now we are many; surely Haaretz has been given to us."[31] They assumed that an ancestral connection with Abraham granted them special privileges, including the inheritance of Haaretz. However, God himself challenges this assumption, informing Ezekiel that those who disobey Him will surely not inherit it. In other words, there is no inheritance without meeting the biblical requirements of justice and righteousness. In view of this teaching, any credible argument for the prophetic place of modern Israel should provide a theological justification for the moral state of Israel and for the dislocation of the 50,000 Christian Palestinian refugees who lost their homes in 1948.[32] This number is huge in view of

30 Ronald Allen, "Numbers," *Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 971.

31 This is my own translation.

32 For further information see Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 2003). See also Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

the number of exiles mentioned in Jeremiah 52:28–30, that is, 3023 exiles in 597 B.C., 832 in 587 B.C., and 745 in 582 B.C.[33]

Our discussion of the claim that God gave Israel her land shows that this claim does not pay sufficient attention to the territorial fluidity of Haaretz, to the notion that biblical Israel is a non-exclusive ethnic group, or to the moral requirements for dwelling in Haaretz. Gladly, there is a better biblical alternative that can accommodate the territorial and ethnic fluidities without overlooking the standards of holiness required to inhabit Haaretz. That alternative is this: Christ is the owner of Haaretz. It is fitting now to advance an argument for a Christological ownership. Let us start by looking at the meanings of Haaretz from this perspective.

The meanings of Haaretz

The history of research on the theology of Haaretz demonstrates that biblical scholars have moved away from limiting the concept of Haaretz to just one meaning.[34] Instead, they rightly assert that the meaning of Haaretz depends on its historical, cultural, and theological contexts and requires a plurality of approaches in order to unpack it. Although we recognize the value of this plurality, due to space limitations, we will focus on the ownership of Haaretz and some of the meanings relevant to it.

The ownership of Haaretz cannot be understood without a theology that perceives God as the ultimate creator and owner of the earth (Gen 1), the one who entrusted it to humanity. Indeed, in defining Haaretz in Scripture we must consider the human and the divine, the anthropological and the theological. Anthropologically, the bond between Haaretz and the human race is emphasized because of culture and agriculture. Theologically, Haaretz has functional roles, such as reflecting God's blessing or curse. Like the human race, Haaretz lives out salvation history. It suffered when sin entered and it will experience renewal through redemption. When its possessors were sinners, it experienced the curses of God, but when they followed God it experienced rest signifying an ontological change. Thus, its meaning and nature are strongly associated with its masters. Whenever injustices dominate, it suffers

33 Even if we take the figures mentioned in 2 Kings 24:14, 16 (10,000 people) as the number of exiles in 597 B.C., the number of Christian Palestinian refugees is still five times more than that number.

34 Four important voices illustrate this movement. First, in 1966, in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* von Rad distinguished between the historical and the cultic concepts. Consequently, he paved the way for studying the plural meanings of Haaretz in scriptures. Second, in the 1970s W. D. Davies wrote a comprehensive monograph titled *The Gospel and the Land* in which he surveyed the data of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Rabbinic sources, and the New Testament. He concludes that there are two main strata. In one stratum, Haaretz, Jerusalem, and the Temple are negative and are even rejected on occasion. In this stratum, there is freedom from space. The opposite is true in the other stratum. Third, in the same decade, Walter Brueggemann picked up the concern with space and the multiple aspects of Haaretz. Using the social-scientific method, he advances the theology of Haaretz especially in his book *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*. He develops a biblical theology highlighting landedness and landlessness as dialectical aspects and arguing that Haaretz cannot be reduced to mere physical dirt or to a spiritual metaphor. Last, in the mid-1990s, Norman Habel developed Bruggemann's work in his book *The Land Is Mine*, arguing that the Bible has six ideologies of Haaretz (Royal, Theocratic, Ancestral-Household, Prophetic, Agrarian, and Immigrant). He clearly moves from a monolithic concept of Haaretz to a spectrum of land ideologies.

and all of its inhabitants become restless; but whenever its inhabitants are godly, it flourishes and overflows with blessings.

Put differently, its legitimate owners/inheritors determine its nature for it was made for man, not the other way around. If the owners are thieves, then it is the land of thieves. On the other hand, it could be the land of righteousness and whenever its inheritors are righteous, it signifies a place of rest. Indeed, many references in wisdom literature associate Haaretz with the absence of evildoers and the inheritance of the righteous ones (Prov 2:21; 10:30). Further, when Isaiah describes the rest of Haaretz, he uses images of new creation where peace and security prevail (Is 11). A survey of the inheritors/owners of Haaretz in Scripture should open up new windows for understanding it.[35] At the risk of oversimplification, we will study the relevant data in three stages: before Abraham, between Abraham and Christ, and after Christ.

Before Abraham

In this era, the focus is not on Haaretz^{Canaan} but on Haaretz^{Global}, which has several nuances. For example, it could mean planet earth (Gen 1:1), or earth without the waters (Gen 1:24–25; 6:12), or the people of the world (Gen 11:1). A brief study of the usages and contexts of Haaretz^{Global} in Genesis 1–11 shows us that it occurs for the first time in Genesis 1, where we are informed that God is her creator and owner. Then we see God entrusting it to the human race (Gen 1:28–30). At that time there were only two people and thus they were physically unable to rule over the whole earth without the help of their seed. God put them in Eden, the incubator of the human race or the center of the world, entrusting Haaretz^{Global} to Adam and Eve (Gen 1:27–30; 2:8; 3:24–25). He placed them in it and asked them to work there (Gen 2:15) because it was the best place to fulfill His plan for Haaretz^{Global} and to live in harmony with Him. Unfortunately, this harmony did not last because humans disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden tree. The Lord expelled them from Eden (Gen 3:23–24), and from that moment on we see that moving eastward is associated, in Genesis 1–11, with trouble (Gen 3:24; 4:16; 10:25, 30; 11:2). Accessibility to Eden was closed not only because of the Cherubim and the flaming sword (Gen 3:24) but also because of sin. Sin alienated the human race from God and consequently it lacked shalom and saw the curse of Haaretz^{Global}.

35 The Bible presents a long list of the owners of Haaretz, for example God (Gen 1:1; Lev 25:23; Josh 22:19; Ps 24:1), Adam and Eve (Gen 1:26, 28–30), the family of Noah (Gen 9:1–7), one or more of the children of Noah (Gen 10:25), the Canaanites (Gen 10:19; 12:5; 23:2; Deut 1:7; 11:30; 32:49), a list of nations that ranges from three to ten members (Gen 15:19; Ex 3:17; 23:28; Neh 9:8), Abraham and his descendants along with many nations (Gen 13:15; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 22:17), Isaac and descendants along with many nations (Gen 26:3), Jacob and descendants along with many nations (Gen 28:4, 13; 35:12; 48:4), the Israelites along with many other nations (cf. the books of Joshua and Judges), the united kingdom and other nations (cf. 1, 2 Sam and 1 Kgs), the divided kingdom and other nations (cf. 1, 2Kgs), the Assyrian Empire and Judah (2 Kgs 17; Is 7–8; 36–37), the Babylonian Empire (cf. Jer; 2 Kgs 25), the Persian Empire (cf. Ez; Neh), the Greek Empire and the Hasmoneans (cf. the intertestamental literature, for example, the Apocrypha), the Roman Empire (cf. the New Testament), Jesus Christ (Matt 28:18–20; John 1:3; Phil 2:10; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:1–4), Abraham (Rom 4:13), the meek (Matt 5:5), and the children of God (Gal 3:29; Rev 21:1–9).

After the human race multiplied, it provoked God into anger and consequently saw the destruction of Haaretz^{Global} by the Flood. Noah and his family survived and filled Haaretz^{Global} with children born in a sinful state. This demographic change influenced the identity of Haaretz and shifted the emphasis from Haaretz^{Global} to several local places. For the first time in Scripture, the singular Haaretz becomes plural and thus we have Haaretz^{Japheth} (Gen 10:5), Haaretz^{Ham} (Gen 10:20), and Haaretz^{Shem} (Gen 10:31), besides several divisions within each one of them.

The descendants of Ham deserve special attention for their lands became the focus of many subsequent texts. First, Canaan, son of Ham, occupies the land promised to Israel. His land is the only place where we find explicit borders in primeval history apart from Eden (Gen 10:19). Second, Nimrod, a descendant of Ham, established the first human kingdom in Eretz Shinar (Gen 10:10). There, the whole earth participated in building the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9), provoking God's anger. Their activity was matched by a divine activity. They tried to go up but God came down and confused their tongues, scattering them. This is the biblical explanation for the existence of many languages, nations, and lands (cf. Gen 10:5, 20, 31).

In other words, the plurality of languages and lands is understood in a theological framework as the result of sin. The real problem is not the plurality of lands, but sin. The former is only a result of the latter. It is the symptom, not the disease. As a result, any effective solutions must address the root of the problem, that is, the curse of Adam when he disobeyed God. For through him Haaretz was cursed and through those who walked in his footsteps it experienced further divine judgment. Haaretz can prosper only when righteousness prevails. Its redemption and the restoration of its unity are only possible when the antidote of its curse is found.

The Bible also presents Shem and his descendants as related to the Haaretz (11:10) and leading us to Abram (Gen 12). Through the seed of Abram, we are told, God will redeem Haaretz and restore its unity and blessing. Neither the cursed Canaan (Gen 9:25) nor the builders of the tower of Babel (Gen 11) could perform this task. Instead, God chose Abram and his seed to be his instruments.

After Abram but Before Christ

This period starts with the pivotal text of Gen 12:1–3. Structurally, the text might be divided into two sets and translated as:

I. Leave your land, your kindred, and the house of your father and go to the Haaretz that I will show you; then I shall make you into a great nation, bless you, and make your name great.

II. Be a blessing so that I can bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and that all the families of the earth can be blessed in you.

In biblical Hebrew, both sets have similar syntax, alliterations, and rhymes. Both have repetitions highlighting the concept of blessing in a symmetrical way, and both have centers pointing to Abram's blessing whether positively or negatively. In short, the emphasis of the text is on "blessing."[36] The text does not claim an unconditional grant of land to Abram, and the focus is not on Haaretz but on divine blessing that through Abram overflows to the ends of the earth. Abram is going to be a blessing.

36 This can also be seen in the grammatical shift at the end of the second set. After a list of imperfectives we encounter a perfect verb highlighting the cosmic blessing.

However, even though he built altars unto the Lord (Gen 12:7–8), there was a strong famine in Haaretz (Gen 12:10), reminding us of its curse (Gen 3:17–19) and of the need for God's redemption. This divine redemption will be accomplished through Abram's seed.

Put differently, in Genesis 12, God shows Abram Haaretz^{Abrahamic}. In Genesis 13, Abram sees the land that he and his seed are supposed to inherit. In Genesis 15, God gives further details about it. And in Genesis 22:17, God declares that the dominion of the seed of Abraham will extend to include all the territories of their enemies. Haaretz^{Abrahamic} is not going to be with fixed borders. It will keep on expanding, conquering the gates of the enemies, increasing in size both territorially and demographically. Haaretz^{Abrahamic} will continue to grow until it is equal to Haaretz^{Global}. Its inhabitants will be as numerous as the sand of the sea or the stars of heaven for God's intentions were not to formulate fixed borders but to unite the ends of the world under the Abrahamic banner. The many lands will become one through Abraham's seed.

This divine vision is present not only during the Abrahamic era, but also during and after the Davidic period. A quick look at the book of Psalms suffices to illustrate this point. In Psalm 2, God says to his anointed one, "I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession" (Ps 2:8). Clearly, God did not intend to isolate Abraham or his descendants from the rest of the world. On the contrary, he wanted a theocratic kingdom filled with Abraham's children. But Israel preferred to have a human king (1 Sam 8). This ideological shift initiated a new era in which the Davidic dynasty appears. However, it did not abolish the global aspect of God's promises. Gladly, many voices contextualized the hope that Haaretz^{Abrahamic} would still turn into Haaretz^{Global}. Zion and its temple would become the center of their world. Isaiah informs us that all the nations will come to Zion to the house of the Lord (Is 2:1–4). Psalm 87 proclaims that different nations will become citizens of Zion.[37] They are part of a community that values the city of God and lives in it.[38] They have become part of a multiethnic and multicultural group whose legitimate differences in perspective are not stronger than their loyalty to the God of Zion. Zion hosts all of them and her God grants them local citizenship without any biases. All are considered equal by birth. They could obtain permanent inheritance and enjoy

37 In agreement with *Encyclopaedia Judaica* and *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, I think that since the times of David, Zion acquired special importance. Geographically, it referred to the temple mount (Ps 20:3; Joel 4:17, 21), the whole of Jerusalem (Is 2:3, 33:14; Joel 3:5), or to Judea (Is 10:24, 51:11). Figuratively, it is associated with the people of Judah, or the people of God (Is 51:16; 59:20). Furthermore, the New Testament associated it with the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal 4:21–31) and thus facilitated restoring the importance of Zion theology, utilizing eschatological imageries and reminding us of the cosmic dimension of Zion declared in the Old Testament. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 16, s.v. "Zion," 1030; S. Musholt, "Zion," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14, 2nd ed., 930.

38 The transformation of the nations is an important ingredient of Zion theology. John Strong explains that Zion theology includes five motifs: (1) Mount Zion is associated with Mount Zaphon, (2) a river flows out of Zion, (3) Yahweh conquers chaos, (4) Yahweh provides security to Jerusalem, and (5) the nations are transformed; they come to Zion to acknowledge Yahweh's sovereignty. John T. Strong "Zion: Theology of," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 4, ed. W. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1314.

the continuous support of the community of God.[39] According to Kenton Sparks, this vision fits an ancient Near Eastern mentality of empires or global kingdoms, which are by nature multiethnic and not tribal or parochial. Sparks' comments on this issue are relevant to our discussion: "For the Egyptians and Assyrians, identity was political and cultural, not ethnic, and was linked with kingship, the king's relationship to the deity, and the deity's role in extending the national borders and the native empire to the 'ends of the earth'."[40] The identity of these empires is not controlled by ethnicity but by a linkage to a deity.[41] Their main organizing principle is not consanguinity but a socio-religious identity. If this vision is also God's vision for the world, then it follows that Israel's identity and land is not fixed but should be continually expanding.

After Christ

Several authors have used the New Testament to address the issue of Haaretz. W. D. Davies argues that it has been "Christified."[42] William Blanchard furthers Davies and von Rad's arguments—describing the nature of Christ's ministry as "christifying" space, pointing out that the focus of Jesus was Jerusalem and its worship. Peter Walker picks up this issue and, based on Paul, Hebrews, John, Luke-Acts, and Revelation, concludes that Haaretz is subsumed in the New Testament under God's purposes for the whole world. In doing so, he connects the theme of Haaretz to salvation history.[43]

The latter is indeed a helpful framework in both Old and New Testaments. Within this framework, the New Testament has important contributions to make concerning the ownership and borders of the land.[44] The New Testament teaches that Jesus is the second Adam (1 Cor 15:45) and, as with Adam, God entrusted him with Haaretz^{Global} (Gen 1:28–30; Matt 28:18; 11:27). This turning point in redemptive history, according to D. A. Carson, signifies that the sphere of Christ's authority includes all earth.[45] Carson labels it as "absolute authority"; Donald Hagner calls it "comprehensive sovereignty"; and Gundry describes it as "universal authority."[46]

---

39 R. J. D. Knauth provides a good summary of the status of aliens in ancient Israel. He informs us that generally aliens did not obtain permanent inheritance and lacked family ties. R. J. D. Knauth, "Alien, Foreign Resident," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 32.

40 Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 91.

41 We can see a similar notion of identity in the early spread of Islam.

42 Davies has influenced my thinking, especially in his books *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), and *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

43 Peter W. L. Walker, "The Land in the Apostles' Writings," in *The Land of Promise,* ed. Philip Johnston and Peter Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 98.

44 The New Testament authors universalized the concept of Haaretz. Instead of Haaretz^{Israel} they use the whole earth, that is, Haaretz^{Global}.

45 D. A. Carson, "Matthew," *Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 594.

46 Ibid., 594; Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B, ed. Bruce Metzger (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1995), 886; Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 595.

Simply stated, Christ has ownership rights over Haaretz[Global], including the Middle East. This ownership has been declared in the first century after Christ's birth, that is, after all the promises of the Old Testament have been given. In accordance with progressive revelation, Christ is now the owner of Haaretz even if God had entrusted it to Abraham and his descendants in the past. He owns it because he is the Abrahamic seed and the fulfillment of prophecies.

Paul supports this understanding, stating that Christ is the king of Haaretz[Global], for every knee will bow down to Him (Phil 2:10). All things were created by Him and for Him (Col 1:16). He is the teleological goal and the divine means. Curtis Vaughan writes that He shaped its physical and theological identities, and it reflects some of His characteristics.[47] He is the means by which Haaretz was created. In short, theologically, Haaretz must be understood in a Christological framework. It is no longer defined by the Abrahamic promises, for Christ is the one whom God made as the heir of everything (Heb 1:2). Morris asserts that "heir" means one who gains lawful possession.[48] The author of Hebrews thus is claiming that Christ is the lawful heir "of everything" (*pantōn)*. He adopts an Old Testament teaching, advocating God's anointed one as the rightful heir and challenging all those who consider the emperor to be the heir of all things.[49] The simple claim is that Christ would receive the nations as his inheritance and the ends of the earth as his possession (Ps 2:7–8; 89:27). More specifically, it is an everlasting possession, for *klēronomos* ("heir"), according to Elingworth, points to permanent possession, usually of land.[50]

The New Testament demonstrates that Christ is the Abrahamic seed in which and through which all the promises are fulfilled. Through Him, Haaretz[Abrahamic] grows into Haaretz[Global]. In fact, Abraham himself believed in Jesus (John 8:56) and through faith he became the heir of the whole world. Haaretz[Abrahamic] became Haaretz[Global] through faith in Jesus (Rom 4:13). Commenting on Rom 4:13, Bailey says that even though Paul knew the Septuagint well, he felt free to replace the word *gē*, the Greek equivalent of Haaretz, with *kosmos*, or the whole world, in order to highlight the cosmic dimension of the Abrahamic promises; Paul is clearly expanding the promises of land mentioned in Genesis 12:7 and 17:8.[51] Bailey adds that in the intertestamental period, the territorial promise is either universalized or spiritualized. He supports his argument by several examples, such as Jubilees 32:16–26, Ben Sirach 44:21, Enoch 40:9, and Psalms of Solomon 17:32. Bailey is right in seeing the universal dimension of Haaretz; however, it seems to me that this universality or this global vision for the children of Abraham has existed since the birth of the Abrahamic promises (Gen 12:3; 22:17).

47 Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," in "Ephesians-Philemon," *Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 182.

48 Leon Morris, "Hebrews," *Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 13.

49 Graig Koester, *Hebrews*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 36, eds. William Albright and David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 185.

50 Paul Elingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 94–95.

51 Kenneth E. Bailey. "St. Paul's Understanding of the Territorial Promise of God to Abraham," *Theological Review: Near East School of Theology* 15, no. 1 (1994): 60.

The biblical data demonstrates that the concept of the borders of Haaretz was fluid since its inception and that God wanted to reach to the ends of the earth. This vision is only possible through Christ for He alone is the legitimate owner of Haaretz, a place that is not made up of mere dirt but is a locale where righteousness and justice should prevail. No wonder, Christ proclaimed, that "the meek shall inherit the land" (Matt 5:5). The meek, not the strong, aggressive, harsh, or tyrannical will enter Haaretz and inherit it (cf. Deut 4:1; 16:20; cf. Is 57:13; 60:21).[52] Further, according to Carson, "there is no need to interpret the land metaphorically, as having no reference to geography or space."[53]

In other words, Haaretz is not only literal, but its legitimate inhabitants are characterized by godly qualities. In Paul's words, "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29). Paul is here refuting the Judaizers' claim that becoming part of the physical seed of Abraham through circumcision secures becoming part of the Abrahamic promises.[54] Christ alone is the legitimate seed of Abraham in whom the promises will be fulfilled (Gal 3:16). To be associated with Him is the only legitimate means for belonging to the seed of Abraham and consequently to the Abrahamic promises. Therefore, any theological claims that replace Christ's ownership with Israel's must deal with the difficulties of defining Israel and with the New Testament claims that Christ receives the Abrahamic inheritance of Haaretz.

Conclusion

This essay provides a biblical framework for questioning any theological system that promotes a higher status for one nation than another, hoping to persuade Muslims to revisit Christianity. This time, false theological ideologies are not hindering them from being challenged with the unique authority of Christ and his ownership of the land, a claim that challenges Islamic thinking in more than one way. For Muslims believe that Palestine belongs to Allah and the Quran is the final divine revelation. They further assert that the Quran alone preserves previous true religious understandings, arguing that righteous Jews and Christians are in fact Muslims (Quran 2:132–36), and that Islam is the true inheritor of all the divine promises. As a result, Muslims believe they must rule holy Palestine, where Jews and Christians can live only as *Ahl Al-dhimmah*, "the people of the covenant of protection," and not as rulers.[55] They further believe that the land of Palestine is holy mainly because of the Dome of the Rock and Al Aksa Mosque. Both of them are located in Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam, described in Arabic as the "flower of all cities" (زهرة

52 Carson, "Matthew," 133.

53 Ibid., 133.

54 James Montgomery Boice, "Galatians," Expositors Bible Commentary, vol. 10, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 469.

55 Naim Ateek. "Jerusalem in Islam and for Palestinian Christians," in *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, ed. Peter Walker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 128–129.

المدائن). In their theology, Palestine is an Islamic *waqf*, a sacred possession given in perpetuity to Muslims.[56]

In the final analysis, dialogue with Muslims requires both local and Western Christians to clarify a biblical theology of the land. It will help Muslims to hear Christians promote Christ as owner of the land rather than suggest it is a natural Jewish inheritance. Even though Muslims do not accept Christ as Savior, they do have a high view of Christ. Christ is not only the distinguishing factor between our two religions but he is also a crucial connection we have for a fruitful inter-religious dialogue on the theology of Haaretz. A biblical theology of the land that sees Christ as its owner pushes us closer to the truth. This truth would also be helpful for establishing meaningful dialogue.

56 In Islam, Jerusalem is holy for several reasons: (1) it is associated with Abraham and Ishmael who are Muslims; for the Quran informs us that Abraham prays that his descendants will be Muslims (Quran 2:127–128). (2) Muhammed taught Muslims to pray towards Jerusalem (Al-Qiblah, القبلة) before they started praying facing Mecca (Quran 2:142–149). (3) Muslims believe that in the night of Al-Isra' wa-al-mi'raj (الإسراء والمعراج) Muhammed rode Al-buraq, Prophet Muhammed's winged horse, and was transported from Mecca to Jerusalem and then to heaven (Quran 17:1). Later Caliph Abd el-Malik built the dome of the Rock in 691 A.D., and Caliph Waleed built the Al-Aksa Mosque in 709–715 A.D. Obviously, the concept of holy space in Islam is different from Christ's proclamations (cf. John 4:20–24).

ERT (2025) 49:2, 191–199

Book Reviews

Discipleship for Every Stage of Life: Understanding Christian Formation in Light of Human Development
Chris A. Kiesling

Pb., 216 pp., bibliography, subject index

Reviewed by Daniel Vullriede, lecturer, Bibelseminar Bonn (Germany); Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano (Italy).

Christian ministry can be a complex and demanding endeavour for many different reasons. Surely, one central factor is that we are dealing with human beings. But what does this mean for our vision and practice of ministry? How do we account for the fact that we lead and serve, reach and meet, strengthen and shepherd real people? And how does human flourishing look like from a decidedly Christian point of view?

Chris A. Kiesling serves as professor for human development and Christian discipleship at Asbury Theological Seminary, USA. In this book, he undertakes a close dialogue between the disciplines of faith formation and human sciences. Beginning with a helpful introduction, the author explains his basic concern and methodology. Strictly speaking, Kiesling moves from context to text but without leaving his dogmatics behind. He tries to show in what ways a 'particular stage of human development [might] serve as the impetus for theological interpretation, reflection, and liturgical formulations' (6). He also frames his book from a theological point of view, underscoring the primacy of God's revelation and his own spiritual heritage, as he comes from the Wesleyan evangelical tradition.

The seven main chapters of the book cover the different stages of a human being's life:

- Womb and Infancy: Origins of Faith and Belief
- Early Childhood: Parenting as Image Bearers
- Middle Childhood: New Settings, Skills, and Social Pressures
- Adolescence: Sharing the Power of Creation
- Young Adulthood: The Script to Narrate One's Life
- Middle Adulthood: Finding Practices Sufficient to Sustain
- Late Adulthood: Retirement, Relinquishment, and the Spirituality of Losing Life

Understandably, the author offers no magic keys with which one could push the Christian faith into a person's life and heart at any stage. Instead, he acknowledges the vastness and complexity of the topic, explaining relevant theories and important insights without concealing their potential limits. Moreover, in every chapter, the author connects his findings with theological questions as well as with the needs and realities of Christian ministry.

Kiesling gives robust input but with clarity and tactfulness, not trying to talk his audience into one particular position. Thus, on the one hand, he sensitizes his readers on a basic level to their own outlook on life and ministry, encouraging them to

keep learning and to marvel at God's creation. On the other hand, Kiesling offers concrete, helpful suggestions on how to favour and foster faith according to a person's life situation. In addition, several graphics, figures, and tables help to concretize significant key ideas or important explanatory models.

As with any other book that adopts an interdisciplinary approach, different readers will find the book lacking at different points—whether on the level of methods and argumentation, in the realm of theology, ecclesiology, education or cultural studies, or elsewhere. Also, not everyone will find the many insights equally applicable in different cultural contexts.

Nonetheless, this is a highly useful and thought-provoking book that can enrich anyone's Christian ministry, precisely because it concerns our personhood and creatureliness amidst God's world. Kiesling's thorough introduction shows how practical theology and human sciences might advance one another and where Christians might make further contributions academically, professionally, and practically to the topic. The book provides a necessary, most welcome approach to considering how the Christian faith concerns our whole life and all stages of it, in light of both the cultural mandate and the Great Commission.

Ethiopian Diaspora Churches on Mission: An Intergenerational Perspective on Ethiopian Churches in the United States
Mehari T. Korcho

Carlisle: Langham Academic, 2024
Pb., 243 pp., bibliog.

Reviewed by Melesse K. Woldetsadik, pastor of Beta Selam Evangelical Church, Charlotte, USA

Korcho, who holds a PhD in missions from Columbia International University, explores the expansion of Ethiopian diasporic churches and their pivotal role in fulfilling the Great Commission while also gaining strength as congregations. Unlike many previous studies that concentrate solely on missions directed towards the diaspora, Korcho offers an insightful examination of missions initiated by the diaspora itself. He adopts an intergenerational perspective that encompasses the experiences of the first generation, as well as the second and 1.5 generations (those who arrive in their new country as children).

Korcho provides a thorough analysis of Ethiopian diaspora churches in the United States, shedding light on their history, strengths, weaknesses and the challenges they encounter. He underscores several essential elements that contribute to their success, including spiritual fervor, community life, effective mission strategies, and collaborations with local churches and organizations. Additionally, he emphasizes the need to prioritize family and church structures. Korcho presents practical recommendations aimed at fostering growth and enhancing the effectiveness of these communities.

The first three of the book's seven chapters discuss problems faced by the churches and their effects; the fourth and fifth chapters present Korcho's research findings (based on interviews with adults age 21 to 70); and the last two chapters

offer practical recommendations that could help diaspora churches in the US to prosper. Korcho provides historical background on Ethiopian evangelical diaspora churches and interprets their intergenerational dynamics. From his interviews, Korcho discovers that most diaspora churches' establishment, ministry approach, and growth are not missional, as the congregations focus mainly on reaching their own community.

Korcho highlights spiritual fervour, simplicity and cultural resourcefulness as these churches' most significant strengths. However, he also points out notable inadequacies, including a tendency to stay within their comfort zone, limited evangelism efforts, a lack of vision, and issues related to church splits and divisions.

In discussing the challenges these churches face, the author distinguishes between first-generation and second-generation congregations. First-generation churches struggle mainly with language barriers, a lack of a missional mindset, and insufficient training. In contrast, second-generation churches face issues such as a lack of discipleship, ethnic diversity, and instability.

Korcho emphasizes the importance of maintaining spiritual enthusiasm and community life while encouraging churches to focus on growth that begins with internal development before extending outward. This approach aims to foster a missional mindset that promotes awareness and critical evaluation of growth strategies. Korcho suggests several actionable steps for churches to consider, such as thoroughly assessing the advantages and disadvantages before investing in church buildings, adopting an integrated ministry model, and transitioning from a focus solely on evangelism to broader missions. He also highlights the need for unity and advocates for a family-oriented approach to ministry. Partnering with local churches and mission organizations is another key recommendation, along with a thorough evaluation of church structures (i.e., to prevent a self-focused ministry that solely serves the immediate community, which does not ensure participation by second-generation and 1.5-generation members in mission activities).

Korcho provides a thoughtful examination of the Ethiopian diaspora church, effectively addressing both its challenges and strengths while underscoring its substantial potential for mission work in the West. He highlights key issues that resonate not only with Ethiopian congregations but also with diaspora communities globally. His insights on involving the second and 1.5 generations in ministry while upholding the vision of the first generation are particularly noteworthy. Moreover, Korcho encourages diaspora churches to consider their roles in mission work and emphasizes the significance of building relationships with American churches for mutual encouragement and growth.

The study would benefit from a deeper exploration of how Ethiopian diaspora churches can connect effectively with other diaspora Christian communities in the United States, allowing for sharing of experiences and collaborative problem-solving. Overall, however, the book reflects the unwavering spirit of the diaspora church and its dedication to serving God in a new context. I highly recommend it for the diasporic Christian community, Christians in the West, and anyone interested in understanding God's plan and agenda for the global church.

What It Means To Be Protestant
Gavin Ortlund

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2024
Pb., 288pp., index

Reviewed by Geoffrey Butler, Adjunct Professor, Horizon College and Seminary and Regent University

Recently, my wife and I fulfilled a long-time dream to visit the great cities of Rome and Athens. We are Protestant pastors, firmly committed to the doctrines of the Reformation. In central Italy, however, it was impossible not to be struck by the intellectual seriousness and cultural impact of the Roman Catholic Church. In Greece, the resilience and liturgical beauty of Eastern Orthodoxy is likewise impressive.

While Protestants might appreciate our Catholic and Orthodox counterparts, a trend of high-profile conversions from evangelicalism to those branches of the faith and a resurgent fascination with liturgical traditions among younger Christians have unnerved some. Numerous young evangelicals with whom I graduated from Canada's largest seminary have since embraced Catholicism, in part because of issues that Ortlund addresses in *What It Means To Be Protestant*. As an 'accidental' apologist for his branch of Christianity, Ortlund thus offers a timely message. He contends that Protestant theology, rather than being a 16th-century innovation, is historically rooted and biblically faithful. Although its doctrine of an always-reforming church is often identified as a supposed weakness by critics, Ortlund contends that it is actually one of Protestant theology's great strengths.

Ortlund's volume has three major sections: Protestantism and catholicity; Protestantism and authority; and Protestantism and history. He clarifies from the beginning that he is contending for a 'mere Protestantism' (xx), wisely focusing on defending the *solas* of the Reformation that all Protestants would affirm. That decision lends itself well to the generous understanding of the faith that Ortlund promotes. He explains how not only contemporary Protestants but the reformers themselves adopted an ecumenical attitude toward the wider church, recognizing Orthodox and Catholic churches as legitimate Christian communities despite their perceived doctrinal errors.

One of Ortlund's most important (and provocative) claims is that neither Roman Catholic nor Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology is sufficiently catholic (32). Historically, both have claimed to be the one true church, apart from which there is no salvation. Such a claim presents a significant problem when one considers, for example, the many underground Christian communities that have emerged in closed countries since the advent of the internet, apart from any claim to apostolic succession or even the oversight of a bishop. Even if they preach the gospel, administer the sacraments and hold an orthodox understanding of the faith, historically only Protestants, Ortlund notes, would have recognized such a community of believers as a valid church.

Ortlund is quick to admit weaknesses in modern Protestant theology, using such to call his own tradition back to its Reformation-era commitments. What makes Protestant theology attractive, according to Ortlund, is that it assumes the church will need to correct its own doctrine and practice at times (11). Only if one holds

that even the church is subject to the authority of Scripture alone is such correction possible. Ortlund thus contends that the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* has proven invaluable in church history, especially when the gospel has been obscured. Far from being a weakness, the Protestant recognition that the church can—and indeed does—err has permitted it to recognize where it has gone astray (72).

Amidst this discussion, one of the book's few notable weaknesses arises. When Ortlund challenges the Roman Catholic view of doctrinal infallibility, his criticism of the church's change of attitude towards the death penalty is a curious choice for one advancing a 'mere Protestantism'. Even many conservative Protestants outside the United States would disagree with his claim that capital punishment boasts 'universal support throughout Scripture and church history' (84). That said, even this example reinforces a broader point that Ortlund establishes well: only Protestantism can adequately correct perceived theological errors within its ranks without undermining its own doctrine of the church.

This book is an invaluable contribution for Protestants seeking to better understand their tradition. Ortlund convincingly defends core Protestant commitments such as *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*; answers Catholic and Orthodox objections in a thoughtful manner; and demonstrates how evangelicals may appreciate non-Protestant contributions to the body of Christ while still defending the veracity of Protestant distinctives. In an academically rigorous yet accessible and pastorally sensitive manner, he articulates 'the single greatest contribution of Protestantism to the Christian church: its insight into the gracious heart of God revealed in the gospel, by which God offers to us as a free gift the righteousness we cannot attain through our own efforts' (68). As such, his volume should serve as a useful resource for Protestant academics, pastors, and laypersons alike.

Millennial People, Boomer Priest
Stephen Noll

Newport Beach, CA: Anglican House, 2024
280 pp.

Reviewed by Bruce Barron, former editor, Evangelical Review of Theology

In 2009, the Anglican Church of North America separated from the mainline Episcopal and Anglican denominations of the United States and Canada, respectively. Since then, North American evangelicalism has experienced a small Anglican revival, as young Christians looking for a combination of historic church tradition, liturgy, and faithfulness to Scripture have turned to the ACNA.

In 2021, Stephen Noll, a prominent figure in the battles that led to the ACNA's creation, agreed to serve as interim pastor of a small, newly planted Anglican congregation. He was 75 years old and retired from his seminary teaching position; many of his adult church members were half his age or less and with little experience of Anglicanism. Accordingly, Noll had to bridge both differences in both age and spiritual orientation to nurture his flock.

This fascinating book documents his experience. It primarily contains messages he preached and (overcoming what Noll, a lover of dry humour, calls his "app-

horrence" of technology) podcasts he recorded as he sought to connect with his congregation. Before that, the introduction addresses various sensitive issues that affect churches all over the world. Noll struggled with younger people's preference for privacy when he tried to create a church directory, discovered that texting was the only way to get many of them to respond, familiarized parishioners with the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, and gently facilitated a discussion of whether the church was open to calling a woman as their permanent pastor (they decided they were not).

The collected sermons provide a solid introduction to essential Christian teachings and spiritual practices, along with occasional insights on Noll's handling of touchy situations. For example, he used Paul's teaching on the strong and the weak (Rom 15) and the option of outdoor services to avert internal division and hard feelings as the COVID-19 pandemic eased.

When explaining the purpose of the church's historic creeds, Noll drew on his years as vice chancellor at Uganda Christian University, where 'I had an employee … who could pray up a storm at our staff meetings, even as he stole money out of the till" (57). He then pointed out that the creeds "set the boundaries that channel genuine faith and piety' (58) and that although some traditions set the Bible over against creeds, in fact the Bible itself contains creeds such as the Shema of Deuteronomy 6 and several texts cited by Paul.

Noll participated in the charismatic renewal early in his Christian life. The great depth and eloquence of his messages enabled him, when talking about the Holy Spirit several months into his pastorate, to refer to his own experience of tongue speaking in a matter-of-fact, credible way. I wish he had indicated whether any mouths dropped open in the congregation when he did so.

One striking aspect of Noll's messages is how little he appears to have changed his style to appeal to millennials. He makes only very rare references to contemporary culture, as in a few sporadic mentions of the Bible-based video series *The Chosen.* The main features that make his messages and podcasts attractive should work with any audience: they are short, clear, and suitable for people with limited theological training. Some discussion in the book of how his congregation responded to his teaching would have been helpful, but if you're looking for guidance on explaining the church's classic truths in an endearing manner, you will find valuable pearls here.

Exploring the New Testament in Asia: Evangelical Perspectives
Samson Uytanlet and Bennet Lawrence, eds.

Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Partnership, 2024
Pb., 327 pp., index

Reviewed by Myra G. Patrocenio, lecturer in Old Testament Studies and Hebrew at Logos Theological Seminary, Philippines

This book has two major sections. The first section addresses foundational New Testament issues and methodological approaches, with contributors examining these through diverse Asian contexts and interpretive lenses. The second section

highlights issues particularly relevant to Asian readers that are frequently overlooked in mainstream New Testament scholarship. Overall, the volume demonstrates Asia's cultural richness and diversity—characteristics that the editors argue are reflected within the New Testament texts themselves.

In their introduction, the editors affirm the infallibility of Scripture while acknowledging that 'there is no guarantee that our interpretation will be infallible' (1). This hermeneutical humility establishes a framework that readers must embrace to approach the volume with both openness and critical discernment. The editors' call 'to listen to Scripture with an "Asian ear"' (2) is consistently demonstrated throughout the book's contributions. Their attempt to maintain the integrity of the New Testament text in choosing the essays in the volume, while embarking on the challenging task of contextualization, is indeed commendable.

This contextual approach gains legitimacy from the New Testament's own Asian origins, as it was also written within an Asian context and by Asian authors. Asia's multicultural landscape is distinctive because it has been home to diverse civilizations throughout history, and the contributors in this volume demonstrate this diversity through their contextualized work. However, while the volume successfully shows how New Testament and Asian narratives intersect, the methods and criteria used for making these comparisons remain unclear, and some essays in this collection fail to fully address important methodological challenges in this area.

Several specific examples illustrate these methodological concerns. Xiaxia Xue's essay 'Breaking Down the Dividing Walls' argues that 'the gospel of reconciliation and solidarity is revealed through tensions and divisions' and that 'there is an inherent value of solidarity and unity which can be manifested through the work of the Holy Spirit' (36). Despite these claims, Xue fails to justify the comparative approaches used to support this argument. The various historical and biblical conflicts cited in the essay further illustrate the ambiguity surrounding which conflicts can legitimately be compared to the current situation in Chinese churches and society.

Similarly, Johnson Thomaskutty's 'Metaphors of Salvation' presents methodological challenges despite its comprehensive exploration of salvation metaphors in New Testament texts. While I appreciate his thorough analysis, he overlooks a crucial point: these images function as 'metaphors' only for modern readers, not for the original audience. Although I agree that these metaphors convey deeper meaning as 'a literary tool to clarify and suggest mysterious aspects in a text' (56), Thomaskutty should have recognized that most, if not all, of these supposed metaphors were actually common practices and daily experiences that the original readers would have understood literally. The challenge lies in making sense of these New Testament realities in light of modern Asian experience, culture and understanding of salvation.

Narry Santos's opening essay presents another example of these interpretive tensions. Santos explores the diversity of Christ's portrayals in the Gospels and how these distinct portraits can guide both the reading of the Bible culturally and the reading of cultures biblically (8). While this venture is crucial, it overlooks the fact that the four Gospel writers are narrating one unified story expressed through different narrative approaches, rather than presenting entirely diverse cultural perspec-

tives. Santos then proceeds to present what he refers to as 'contextual Christologies' in Asia, grounded in various factors such as colonialism, poverty and cultural diversity. The problem with this approach is that it treats the biblical narrative itself and the interpretation of that narrative as having equal authority. Though it is important to acknowledge Asia's cultural diversity and the need for a more culturally sensitive understanding of Christ that would aid Asians in their struggles against oppression, poverty and religious pluralism, interpreters must be careful not to conflate historical facts with historical interpretation—as appears to be the case when distinguishing between Christological realities and 'contextual Christologies'.

The entire work follows a consistent approach in reading and interpreting New Testament themes and teachings, primarily through comparative studies and word studies. Although it is crucial to acknowledge the 'Asian character' of the New Testament and to recognize that its issues and concerns are also manifested in Asian contexts and theologies, significant challenges remain. Asian cultures contain dynamics and frameworks rooted in belief systems that cannot be directly compared to New Testament texts and contexts without careful methodological consideration.

The central challenge in Asian theology and contextualization lies in establishing appropriate parameters by which to relate our diverse cultural contexts to the unique message of the New Testament. This message is inherently counter-cultural and radically transformative, designed to transcend Asia's systemic cultural diversity and create a unified global culture through the gospel. Any contextual reading of the New Testament, regardless of its cultural relevance, must acknowledge that the New Testament message originated within a specific cultural framework and purpose. Therefore, Asia's multicultural landscape must thoughtfully intersect with this particular cultural foundation while maintaining the text's transformative power and avoiding the methodological tensions evident in several of this volume's contributions.

Theologian of the Resurrection: N. T. Wright's Eschatology and Mission Theology

E. J. David Kramer

Boston, Massachusetts: Brill, 2025
Pb., xiii + 264 pp., bibliography, index

Reviewed by Ma. Teresa del Rosario Vanguardia, Curriculum Development Coordinator at Every Nation Seminary and ThD student at the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, Philippines

E. J. David Kramer offers a theological reading of N. T. Wright that treats the resurrection not merely as a doctrine among others, but as the generative core of Wright's eschatology and missional theology. Kramer, clearly conversant with Wright's expansive body of work, argues that the resurrection functions not only as a climax but also as a catalyst—reordering epistemology, ecclesiology, ethics and public witness. The result is not a survey but a thematic synthesis with theological intent.

Part I examines Wright's eschatology. Kramer begins with Wright's narrative-historical method, grounded in Second Temple Judaism and framed by Wright's

well-known emphasis on worldview analysis. In Kramer's view, Wright's method enables him to construct a coherent eschatological vision that resists both Platonic dualism and escapist futurism. Resurrection, here, is not postponed consolation but historical inauguration of a new creation. The fivefold schema Kramer offers—Jewish, narratival, cosmological, Christological–pneumatological, and missional—effectively organizes Wright's disparate writings into a unified theological structure.

Part II explores the implications of this eschatology for mission. Kramer begins with ecclesiology, presenting the church as the resurrected people of God. Resurrection does not merely comfort the church; it constitutes it. The church becomes a public body whose vocation is to anticipate the age to come through Spirit-empowered witness. Kramer then turns to Wright's view of the gospel, in which resurrection displaces reductionist atonement-centred formulas with the larger claim that Jesus is Israel's Messiah and the world's true Lord. Evangelism becomes proclamation of this cosmic victory, not a sales pitch for private salvation.

Chapters on political theology and ethics extend this argument. Kramer rightly highlights Wright's contention that resurrection delegitimizes Caesar and all rival powers. The risen Jesus is Lord, and this claim necessarily disorients modern political idolatries. Likewise, Kramer explores Wright's reliance on virtue ethics, particularly as shaped by the resurrection. Love emerges as the telos of moral formation, not as sentiment but as cruciform fidelity to God's future. Kramer draws fruitfully on Oliver O'Donovan to frame Wright's moral theology, though more engagement with sin, suffering, or communal formation would have been welcome.

The final chapter frames Wright as a theologian suited for post-Christendom. Resurrection, in Kramer's telling, is Wright's answer to the fragmentation of Western theology after the Enlightenment. By reclaiming history, mission and the kingdom of God through the resurrection, Wright reconfigures theological discourse and pastoral imagination. Kramer is careful not to claim too much, but his admiration for Wright is evident. At times, this results in a lack of critical distance. Readers familiar with Wright's critics—from Reformed interlocutors to liberationist theologians—may wish for more direct engagement with counterarguments. Nonetheless, Kramer's work is a valuable theological contribution. Whereas many introductions to Wright focus on exegesis or controversy, Kramer offers something different: a constructive theological appropriation. His decision to structure the book around the resurrection provides both coherence and focus, even if it occasionally flattens doctrinal distinctions. The work will be particularly helpful to those seeking to understand Wright not simply as a historian but as a public theologian with a clear missional vision.

The book would benefit from a deeper exploration of pneumatology, sacramentality, and non-Western theological voices. Wright writes from and to the post-Christian West, and Kramer follows that trajectory closely. Yet if resurrection is to shape global mission, then it must speak not only to secular disenchantment but also to persecution, poverty and spiritual warfare. Still, Kramer has done a service to the field. By identifying Wright as a theologian of the resurrection, he reorients the conversation from polemic to proclamation. I recommend this book for pastors, theologians and advanced students, especially those wrestling with the intersection of theology and mission in a fractured age.