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# Introduction: On Intellect and Race

Sometimes, good things come in groups. This issue has two themes that materialized without any intent on our part.

The articles by Elmer Thiessen and Richard Smith share a common emphasis that evangelicals are often accused of undervaluing: intellectual development. Thiessen believes that we can advance both Christian unity and our public effectiveness by cultivating intellectual virtues. Smith, in an excerpt from his new book on how the Old Testament can guide our intellectual as well as spiritual development, shows how godly thinking is a central theme of Deuteronomy.

Three articles (by Israel Olofinjana, David Clark and Leah Farish) discuss the need for Christians to embrace the cause of racial justice and equality. In addition, Francis Samdao proceeds in a manner notably similar to Clark in considering how the gospel should be contextualized in different cultural settings. Both Samdao and Clark seek to combine reaffirmation of core evangelical truth with an openness to cultural difference and change.

These four papers all highlight the importance of amplifying marginalized voices, though not in precisely the same way. Ironically, Samdao recommends a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ in one context while Clark cautions against it in another. If you read the two passages, I think you will find that, like Paul and James on the relationship between faith and works, their two positions are complementary. But the different applications of the same phrase remind us not to jump to hasty conclusions when someone uses popular terms *du jour* such as critical race theory, reparations or exceptionalism.

Christians will always disagree on contemporary issues, because the path from gospel principles to concrete policies is never simple. We must pursue deep understanding and empathy before we criticize others, especially fellow believers. Thiessen’s guide to intellectual humility can help us down that path.

The lead article in this issue seeks to restrain another form of narrow-mindedness—that displayed by authoritarian leaders who lord it over the flock, often driven by a desire for personal gain rather than God’s glory. Johannes Reimer, one of the World Evangelical Alliance’s leading promoters of peacemaking and reconciliation, analyses a pattern of domineering leadership that is hindering church growth in former Soviet countries.

I find Reimer’s message all too familiar because I began my research career by studying authoritarian tendencies in parts of the charismatic movement. I received more “Don’t touch God’s anointed” warnings than I care to remember, sometimes from leaders whose serious moral failures were later exposed. Reimer says the Russian Evangelical Alliance believes that his message is urgently needed. I pray that it may reach the people who need to read it.

Finally, we are pleased to present a comprehensive essay on responses to religious persecution by two of the world’s most prominent experts on the topic, Dennis Petri and Ronald Boyd-MacMillan.

Happy reading!

— Bruce Barron, Executive Editor

# The Erosion of Church Growth through Patriarchal Leadership in Russia

Johannes Reimer

*Authoritarian patriarchal leadership has spawned abuse, scandal and controversy caused tragedies in churches and Christian ministries all over the world. This article highlights the pervasive problem of autocratic leadership among Russian evangelicals—explaining the historical reasons for the development of this pattern, analysing its components and urging a healthier way forward.*

## Able to build ... or destroy

In a conversation on leadership in Russian evangelical churches, a young man complained:

Our pastor started the church. We all are his spiritual children. And our church was a shining example of effective growth. Hundreds of people were won for the gospel, baptized and integrated into the mission work of the church. Some excellent leaders grew out of this mission work. But things are not going well with our church today. Our younger leaders have left, the growth has stagnated, and the senior pastor has started a fight with his own church members. He seems to be actually searching for people in the church whom he can blame for the lack of success. And this, in turn, forces them also to leave the congregation. What is this? It is like an erosion in nature where strong water flow, wind and natural disasters remove soil, rock and dissolved material and move them from one location to the other.

Hundreds of leaders in Russia have voiced similar concerns.<sup>1</sup> In my recent visits (in November and December 2021) to conduct leadership conferences, participants from Russia and several former Soviet nations called strongly for urgent training in leadership to prevent a possible disaster.

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1 See for instance the recently published study by Roger Gill and Alexander Negrov, 'Perspectives on Leadership Development in Post-Soviet Eurasia', *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management* 21, no. 3 (2021): 409–29; A. Belov and A. Negrov: 'Predstavleniya starshikh pokoleniy veruyushikh o ponimanii liderstva evangel'skoy molodezh'y u Evrazii' [Perspectives of the Older Generation on How the Youth Understand Leadership], in A. Belov and A. Negrov (eds.), *The Phenomenon of Leadership among Evangelicals in Eurasia*, vol. 2 (St Petersburg: St Petersburg Christian University, 2016).

This young Russian man was accurately describing a phenomenon that we might call *erosive forces*, present in certain leadership styles. Erosion stems from the Latin *ērōsio*, ‘cancer’, or *ērōdere* (*ērōsum*), ‘to bite off’. The English geologist Charles Lyell (1797–1875) first used the word to describe natural erosion of the landscape. Today, people use it figuratively to refer to the erosion of finances, political power, personal rights and so on.<sup>2</sup> Erosion is now a commonly used term for decay. It makes sense to apply the term to leadership, as is frequently being done in modern treatises on leadership models and styles.

Leaders are men and women of vision and creative energy. They are capable of building where nothing is in place yet. This is especially true of leaders with an apostolic giftedness. Apostles are self-starters, men and women at the very beginning of a development. They possess courage and guts to build where no one has built before.<sup>3</sup>

But leaders also tend to be guided by a self-actualizing and self-protective set of behaviours. Leadership expert Anne Dranitsaris puts it well:

When self-activating or leading from their authentic self, these leaders have learned to share and delegate authority throughout the hierarchy. They have developed their people leadership skills and recognize the impact of their behavior on others. When they lead from their self-protective persona they become autocratic and controlling. We call this the patriarchal leadership dysfunction.<sup>4</sup>

This problem arises wherever an apostolically gifted person is confronted with a traditional autocratic and patriarchal leadership style, which is widespread in tribal cultures as well as in ideologically fixed dictatorships. This is the case in most African societies, for example.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the ‘big man’ leadership style has been prevalent but has been highly ineffective in fostering the development of African nations. Hierarchically organized denominations, such as the traditional Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, offer similar constructs and influence societies under their dominance accordingly. No wonder we see ‘big men’ ruling many African denominations. The phenomenon is also present in Arab societies.<sup>6</sup>

As long as those denominations provide space for the leaders’ self-actualization, they prove to be able to develop their churches to an amazing size. The situation changes, however, as soon as internal and external developments force these leaders to switch to their self-protective set of behaviour. Erosion of church growth occurs as a result, as the autocratic leadership style continues unrestricted. Subordinates are not allowed to participate in important decisions affecting the organization. Instead,

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2 See the *Collins Dictionary* definition at <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert461js1>.

3 On the nature and gifts of an apostle, see Johannes Reimer, *Leiten durch Verkündigung. Eine unentdeckte Dimension*, 2nd ed. (Giessen: Brunnen Verlag 2005), 72–88.

4 Anne Danitsaris, ‘Patriarchal Leadership Style’, <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert461jr2>.

5 B. Dulani and J. Tengatenga, ‘Big Man Rule in Africa: Are Africans Getting the Leadership They Want?’ *African Review* 46, no. 2 (2000), 275–91, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/1821889X-12340001>.

6 J. Corbon, ‘The Churches of the Middle East: Their Origins and Identity from Their Roots in the Past to Their Openness to the Present’, in A. Pacini (ed.), *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 92–110; F. McCallum, *Christian Religious Leadership in the Middle East: The Political Role of the Patriarch* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 215–17.

disciplined obedience is required. This leadership style follows a strict hierarchy.

Autocratic leadership is widespread in the former Soviet Union, and the churches are no exception. Institutional erosion is, therefore, programmed.<sup>7</sup> Membership development in most churches in the countries of the former Commonwealth of Independent States demonstrate this pattern. For instance, the Baptist churches have lost their growth momentum in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Armenia and other countries.<sup>8</sup> Similar effects can be seen in Pentecostal churches. And most of this stagnation is due to the leadership crisis.

Patriarchal leadership styles are too dysfunctional and erosive in nature. We would do well to identify the elements of erosive forces accompanying strong apostolic leaders as soon as they fall into their self-protective mode of operation.

### **A shift from a congregational to an episcopal system**

The leadership style in evangelical churches across Russia and much of the former Soviet Union has changed considerably over time. Most of the evangelical denominations were congregational in their constitution. The communist state found this format difficult to control and attempted to introduce into the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists a more hierarchical structure with strong, autocratic power institutions. The constitution of the Union of Evangelical Christian-Baptist Churches of 1944 reflects such governmental demands. All former confessions, including the Baptists and Evangelical Christians, were congregationally constituted before 1944. The highest authority was placed in the congregational gathering and, for the larger union, in a congress of delegates of local congregations.

The 1944 constitution eliminated congregational leadership<sup>9</sup> and replaced it with the institution of elder presbyters, regional leaders appointed by the central office in Moscow with approval of the atheist state authorities, who ruled their confessional regions without any control by local churches. The new autocratic leadership soon caused distress in many local congregations, because the appointed men were behaving as dictators beyond any reasonable spiritual authority.<sup>10</sup> Russian historian Sergei Savinsky states:

Many believers were upset about the behavior of certain presbyters, who seemed to have forgotten what their original calling was. Their lust for power, bossy tone and administrative dominance caused the believers to react. The intervention of the elder presbyters in local conflict situations often did not solve, but rather worsened the situation. Complaining was often sanctioned by the excommunication of whole groups of believers.<sup>11</sup>

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7 Ruth C. May, Gregory R. Rayter and Donna E. Ledgerwood, 'Institutional Erosion and Its Effects on Russia's Corporate Leadership', *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* 23, 10 March 2016.

8 See the membership statistics for Russia at <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461jr3> and for Ukraine at <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461jr4>.

9 S. V. Sannikov, *Istoria baptizma* (Odessa: Odesskaya bogoslovskaya seminaia ECh. 'Bogomyслиe', 1996), chapter 20.

10 A. Dementiev, 'Razdelenie EchB', in *Baptist Encyclopedia*, <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461jr5>.

11 S. N. Savitski, *Istoria evangel'skikh khristian baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorusi*, vol. 2 (Saint Petersburg: Bibliya dlya vsekh, 2001), 200.



The autocratic leadership pattern in the Union, introduced primarily by the Soviet state, led after 1961 to a major split. The central leadership was pushed back towards a more congregational style of leadership, but the institution of elder presbyters prevailed and was gradually changed to an episcopal format, which is prevalent today in all major evangelical denominations.

The patriarchal style of leadership has also become the unwritten rule in local churches. Presbyters are called pastors today and often rule autocratically, staying in office 'until the Lord calls them home to heaven'. In turn, younger leaders find it very difficult to move into leadership. They are, as a rule, much better educated than the older generation, but the patriarchal system has become a major barrier limiting their fulfilment of their spiritual calling.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, the most capable ones are leaving the denominations and starting new churches all over again. An amazing segregation is the immediate result.

We need to take a close look at the pattern of self-protective behaviour in patriarchal leadership systems, since a cultural change might be the only way to avert an impending crisis.

### **Naming the self-protective set of behaviours**

Anne Dranitsaris, the leadership specialist cited above, describes the factors that constitute the self-protective behaviour set of authoritarian leaders.<sup>13</sup> They (1) do not trust others, (2) are intolerant of other opinions, (3) seem unable to control their impulsive character, (4) overpower others, (5) are driven and relentless, (6) react mechanistically, (7) foster dependence and (8) communicate in one-way fashion.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Not trusting others*

Authoritarian leaders demand to be the only ones authorized to make a final decision. They refuse in principle to share responsibility, since such a shared position is viewed as potentially sectarian and dangerous for the project they want to be in charge of. They refuse any input from elsewhere. 'Self-protective patriarchal leaders don't realize they are being inflexible. They think the way they do things is the right way and will refuse to take advice from anyone. While they may hear what the other person is saying, they argue and rationalize their position, putting energy into discounting, opposition or dismissing the advice rather than considering its value.'

#### *Intolerant*

When patriarchal leaders act in a self-protective manner, they become incapable of tolerating individual differences and accuse people with a different opinion of being wrong or even stupid. Whoever is not with them is seen as a potential enemy. Only

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12 Gill and Negrov, 'Perspectives on Leadership Development'.

13 Other authors have proposed similar categories; see for example I-M. Obi, K. Bollen, H. Aaldering and M. C. Euwerna, 'Servant and Authoritarian Leadership, and Leaders' Third-Party Conflict Behavior in Convents', *International Journal of Conflict Management* (<https://worldia.org/yourls/ert461jr6>) 32, no. 5 (2021): 769–90, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCMMA-02-2021-0027>.

14 Dranitsaris, 'Patriarchal Leadership Style'. All subsequent quotations in this section come from Dranitsaris' article.

the like-minded are appreciated. 'Patriarchal leaders will also distrust ideas or solutions to issues that others come up with that are different from their own. When someone puts forward an idea, they can feel and act as though their leadership is being threatened because it wasn't their idea. It doesn't matter whether the ideas are good or not. It just wasn't the same as theirs.'

#### *Lacking impulse control*

Patriarchal leaders falling into their self-protective mode quickly lose their temper when their subordinates do not exactly conform to what the leaders expect them to do. They often feel as if they are personally under attack when others fall out of their realm of control. Unable to control their emotions, they may become very abusive and act irrationally.

#### *Overpowering others*

Patriarchal leaders tend to overpower others. Dranitsaris states:

When using their self-protective persona, patriarchal leaders become at best bullies and at worst, dictators. They expect everyone to conform to how they want things done and think the way they think. Any opposition is met with increased aggression if the way they want things done is challenged. They lose their temper when contradicted or disrespected, believing that no one is entitled to challenge them, even if they have asked for others' opinions. Their peers and direct reports are intimidated into silence, causing them to acquiesce and give in, even when they know it's not the right thing to do.

#### *Driven and relentless*

Patriarchal leaders, when acting in their self-actualization mode, are hard-working men and women. They are driven by their own goals and are relentless in seeking to achieve them. People around them are judged according to their own standard and work behaviour. Those who do not follow their pattern will readily be judged as lazy and punished if possible.

#### *Mechanistic and non-emotional*

Patriarchal leaders think of their subordinates as a means to an end. 'Because they aren't aware of their own feelings when they are self-protective, they don't empathize, recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.' To them, their subordinates who display emotions are rather weak or immature. The feelings of people around them are of less interest. The usefulness of people in achieving own goals matters, not their feelings.

#### *Fostering dependence*

When in their self-protective mode, patriarchal leaders create dependent subordinates. They seldom delegate authority, seldom empower their subordinates and normally keep all decision power to themselves. Naturally, they become a classic bottleneck for getting things done, as everything has to flow through them. Dranitsaris writes:

They expect even the most senior people to come to them for decisions. Should someone make a decision without first consulting them, they are reprimanded and punished by the patriarchal leader. They unknowingly make their direct reports dependent on them by assuming to know what is best for them. They act as though they are the only ones capable of having good ideas or making decisions. Much of their behavior is to make sure that they retain and increase whatever control they have for as long as possible so that they won't feel anxious about losing control.

### *One-way communication*

Those who engage in patriarchal leadership have a very direct communication style and normally do a lot more telling than asking. When they are self-protective, they become a closed system, rejecting incoming information that doesn't align with their thinking and controlling who gets what information and when. 'They communicate on a need-to-know basis and don't disseminate information throughout the organization. Self-protective patriarchal leaders control discussions and interactions with their direct reports and dominate meetings, barking at others and expecting compliance.'

## **Russia's evangelical leadership in search of an appropriate leadership format**

Let us return to the situation in Russia today. Leadership is a big issue for the country in its upcoming days, in every aspect of society. Both the attempts to adopt Western models of leadership and the return to a rigid patriarchal and authoritarian style under Vladimir Putin seem not to satisfy.<sup>15</sup> Institutional decay is growing everywhere.

And evangelicals, in this regard, are not much different. Churches are stagnating, younger people are leaving, visionary leadership is missing, and the best Christian leaders are tempted to follow Western invitations and start new groups and denominations. A radical change in leadership style is urgently needed.<sup>16</sup> And change in leadership style might imply an overall change in society.<sup>17</sup> These are big issues and cannot be addressed properly in an article like this. I will just formulate some impulses for further research, study and training. The leadership change will follow at least four crucial steps: (a) develop a contextualized biblical paradigm of leadership; (b) create proper leadership training institutions; (c) orient leadership training towards a missional agenda; (d) adapt the new established model to their church leadership practice.

Protestant churches in Russia need to go back to the Bible and their own history and culture in order to formulate an adequate leadership model which is rooted in Scripture and less dependent on Western models. Those seeking for viable

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<sup>15</sup> May, Rayter and Ledgerwood, 'Institutional Erosion and its Effects on Russia's Corporate Leadership'.

<sup>16</sup> Johannes Reimer and Vladimir Ubeivolc, 'A Church of/for Tomorrow: A New Way of Being a Missional Church in Eastern Europe', *Pulse of Ministry* 26 (2018): 10–32.

<sup>17</sup> See F. Levene and M. J. Higgins, 'Leadership and Change Implementation in a Russian Context', *Journal of General Management* 44, no. 1 (2018): 5–16.

alternatives can look back at the history of evangelicals in Russia. The ‘golden years’ of evangelicalism in Russia after the 1917 revolution not only witnessed amazing growth but also offer innovative mission leadership models, one example of which is the life and ministry of Ivan S. Prokhanov (1869-1933). A simple comparison between Prokhanov’s theological views and those of David J. Bosch, the most prominent missiologist of the late 20th century,<sup>18</sup> reveals how close the two are, even if more than a half a century separates them. Prokhanov was far ahead of his times.<sup>19</sup>

Russian evangelicals will have to recover their missionary memory to make a leadership shift towards a brighter future. In my view, this might be one of the most prominent tasks for the still-young Evangelical Alliance in Russia. In fact, missional leadership (leadership which derives its form from the *missio Dei*, the mission of God as it was exercised by Jesus Christ)<sup>20</sup> offers a format for paradigmatic change not only on leadership issues, but even with regard to the mission of the Russian church. Adopting missional leadership will end to a great extent the diffusive character of patriarchal styles and offer space for the development of a new culture and a new generation of leaders.

Leadership skills are seldom stressed in evangelical seminaries. This calls for a radical shift in pastoral education from a primary emphasis on knowledge to training for ministry, as suggested for instance by Re-Forma ([www.re-forma.global](http://www.re-forma.global)), the World Evangelical Alliance’s programme to support non-formal theological education.

Protestant training programs in leadership must concentrate on the example of Jesus, seeking to adapt his leadership style to their culture and history. Here indigenous leadership stories will be of much greater help than copying Western imports.

It is possible to introduce change only where clear concepts of leadership alternatives exist and have been properly introduced to the constituency and where their advantages have been understood. Only intensive training can introduce a new day in leadership in Russia.

I hope the current leadership, often much too old and completely fixed on their past, will recognize the opportunity to renew the Russian church and advance the gospel. If not, the process of erosion will continue and the church will not be able to fulfil its historic calling.

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18 See for instance David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).

19 Johannes Reimer, ‘Recovering the Missionary Memory: Russian Evangelicals in Search of an Appropriate Missiology’, *European Journal of Theology* 22, no. 2 (2013): 137–48. On Prokhanov, see for instance Wilhelm Kahle, *Evangelische Christen in Russland und der Sowietunion: Ivan S. Prochanov (1869–1935) und der Weg der Evangeliums Christen und Baptisten* (Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1978).

20 Johannes Reimer, ‘Missional Leadership: A Paradigmatic Change in Leadership?’ in *Christian Leadership in a Changing World: Perspectives from Africa and Europe*, ed. Jack Barentsen, Volker Kessler and Elke Meier (Leuven, Paris and Bristol: Peeters, 2016), 95–109.

# In Pursuit of Intellectual Virtue

Elmer John Thiessen

*This article rigorously and insightfully examines three intellectual virtues—love of knowledge and truth, intellectual humility, and open-mindedness—that are essential to Christian maturity and powerful in overcoming strife, contention and polarization.*

Dramatic shifts in two branches of philosophy over the last 50 years are relevant to the church today. The first shift, in epistemology, was described by Lorraine Code in her book *Epistemic Responsibility*.<sup>1</sup> ('Epistemology' refers to the study of knowledge and what is true; 'epistemic' means 'relating to knowledge'.) Code complained that epistemologists, in their analysis of the meaning and justification of knowledge claims, rarely ask about the *person* making the claims.<sup>2</sup> She therefore focussed on the epistemic responsibility of the *knower*, beginning her book with a section on 'intellectual virtue'.

The second shift is in moral philosophy, which since the Enlightenment had focussed on defining ethics in terms of rules and rights. Alasdair MacIntyre called for a recovery of ancient ethical traditions which emphasized the character and virtue of persons.<sup>3</sup>

Both evolutions in philosophical thinking have led to a recent preoccupation with intellectual virtues and vices.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the focus is not simply on the evidence presented for a claim but also on whether a person has been careful in gathering evidence and is open to any counter-evidence that might exist. A concern for intellectual virtues and vices looks at the individual's cognitive life and whether he or she is maximizing the potential to find truth and avoid error.

In their 2007 study of intellectual virtues, Robert Roberts and Jay Wood, both Christian philosophers, describe philosophical reflection on intellectual virtues and vices as 'still in its infancy' but holding 'enormous promise for the recovery of

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1 Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1987).

2 Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, ix.

3 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study of Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). Marvin Oxenham has recently called for 'A Renaissance of Character and Virtue' in the church and in theological education, in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 44, no. 2 (2020): 115–25.

4 For a brief history of virtue epistemology, see Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6–8.

epistemology as a philosophical discipline with broad human importance'.<sup>5</sup> I agree. Accordingly, I believe the study of intellectual virtues and vices is very important for today's church. In this article, I provide a philosophical and biblical overview of three important intellectual virtues: love of knowledge and truth, intellectual humility and open-mindedness. These virtues might be the key to overcoming the disagreements and growing polarizations the church faces today.

### What are intellectual virtues and vices?

There is a rough consensus on the core of important intellectual virtues and vices.

*Intellectual virtues*: love of knowledge and truth; inquisitiveness; attentive observation; patient, careful and thorough reflection; fair-minded interpretation and assessment of what others say or write; intellectual courage; intellectual humility; autonomy; intellectual generosity; open-mindedness.

*Intellectual vices*: intellectual apathy or laziness; intellectual carelessness; intellectual flabbiness; intellectual rigidity; intellectual bias; intellectual cowardice; intellectual pride; dogmatism; hyper-criticism; closed-mindedness.

Can we identify general characteristics from these lists? To do so, we must look more carefully at the meaning of both 'intellectual' and 'virtues'.

The notion of virtue is a moral category. Virtues are related to good character. Aristotle defined virtues as dispositions to do the right thing at the right time and in the right way.<sup>6</sup> Virtues describe what it means to be an excellent human being. They express themselves as deeply ingrained habits of good behaviour.

Intellectual virtues are a subset of the more general notion of virtues.<sup>7</sup> Intellectual virtues have to do with the mind—our ability to think and our desire to know and find truth. As human beings, we have certain natural and God-given faculties that help us to gain knowledge and discover truth. For example, nearly all of us can see and hear. But are we careful in applying these capacities? Have we cultivated good habits in seeing and hearing?

We also have minds. Some of us are not quite as clever as others, and we should not be blamed for this. How much intelligence we possess is not in itself an intellectual virtue. But whatever our innate level of intelligence may be, are we using it well? Similarly, individuals vary in their capacity for memory. But have we cultivated our memory to the best of our ability?

Intellectual virtues have to do with our epistemic faculties, our natural or innate powers to gain knowledge and truth. Christians describe these abilities as God-given, an important aspect of being created in God's image. Our responsibility is to develop these faculties towards a state of maturity or excellence. Of course, an individual's upbringing and social environment might stifle the development of these faculties or powers. Proper nurture is important for us to become mature human beings.

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5 Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2017), 6.

6 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 2, ch. 8.

7 There has been some debate as to whether intellectual virtues should be seen as a subset of moral virtues, or whether these two notions should be seen as independent and distinct from one another. I find myself somewhere in the middle in answering this question.

Christians maintain that sin can also contribute to a failure to achieve intellectual excellence. So a repair of our sinful nature is also needed. We cannot give ourselves credit for having these faculties and powers, just as we do not blame someone for being blind or deaf. Nor can we take credit for the nurture we have received. Nonetheless, we are partially responsible for developing our abilities. Thus, we praise those who make an effort to develop them. We compliment people for being open-minded or criticize those who appear to be intellectually lazy. When we do so, we are entering the moral realm.

We can now define an intellectual virtue<sup>8</sup> as an acquired and enduring personal disposition to use one's epistemic faculties well in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. Conversely, an intellectual vice uses these faculties poorly.

These definitions focus on personal dispositions or character traits.<sup>9</sup> Both have to do with personal intellectual excellences or the lack thereof. Of course, being a good person involves many other things, such as generosity, kindness and courage. But this article's scope is limited to our epistemic faculties, the ones that assist us in the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

The Bible has a lot to say about three of the most important intellectual virtues and vices. Given space limitations, I can only provide a sampling of Bible verses that relate to each of these virtues.

### **Love of knowledge and truth**

Not all scholars consider the love of knowledge and truth an intellectual virtue. Some see it as foundational to all the other intellectual virtues.<sup>10</sup> Others define intellectual virtues generally in terms of the love of knowledge and truth.<sup>11</sup> In fact, it is rather difficult to distinguish between the overall definition of intellectual virtues and the more specific intellectual virtue of the love of knowledge and truth. I do not think it is necessary to resolve this tension. Whether we consider it a general term or a specific intellectual virtue, clearly the love of knowledge and truth is central to our intellectual development, and so I start with it.

The love of knowledge and truth is the disposition to take an interest in information, understanding and the truth about reality; to be excited by the prospect of learning; and to engage in actions that aim at the acquisition, maintenance, transmission and application of knowledge and truth.

We are by nature hard-wired to search for knowledge and truth. Sadly, this desire for knowledge and truth has been distorted by sin. The biblical story of the fall reveals a number of dimensions of 'cognitive malfunction'.<sup>12</sup> We now want to know more than we were meant to know. We want to know independently of God.

8 I have tried to simplify the definitions given in two recent books by philosophers: Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 60; Baehr, *Inquiring Mind*, 102.

9 Following Roberts and Wood, and also Baehr, I take a character-based or responsibilist approach to virtue epistemology. Some philosophers, including Aristotle, take a faculty-based or reliabilist approach to the subject. I prefer to see these approaches as interrelated.

10 Roberts and Wood (*Intellectual Virtues*, 73), for example, begin their treatment of intellectual virtues with the love of knowledge, calling it 'basic to the whole of intellectual life'.

11 See Baehr, *Inquiring Mind*, 102.

12 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 299.

Moreover, the fall has also curbed people's desire for knowledge and truth. Proverbs 1:22 points out that 'fools hate knowledge.' Paul describes human beings after the fall as suppressing the truth and as unable to draw proper conclusions about God from what is clear to us (Rom 1:18–20).

All this leads to a biblical emphasis on cultivating the desire for knowledge and truth. Proverbs frequently refers to the importance of acquiring knowledge and wisdom. Proverbs 2:1–6 uses an array of metaphors to describe the search for knowledge and understanding:

If you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom, and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. (See also Prov 1:22; 18:15; 23:12.)

The Psalms describe delighting in the law of the Lord (Ps 1:2; 112:1). Psalm 119 features in detail the importance of longing for, seeking out, memorizing, meditating on, and walking in accordance with the truths and the wisdom found in God's precepts. Psalm 32:8–9 tells us that God wants to teach us how we should live and then warns us not to be 'like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding' and therefore need to be controlled by bit and bridle.

Jesus spent much of his time trying to get his disciples to grow in understanding. At times, he responded to his disciples' lack of comprehension with obvious frustration: 'Are you still so dull?' (Mt 15:16). Jesus condemned the Pharisees, 'the experts in the law, because you have taken away the key of knowledge' (Lk 11:52). Paul similarly chastised the Christians at Corinth for not being ready to digest a more solid diet of teaching (1 Cor 3:2; cf. Heb 5:11–14; 6:1). In his final discourses, Jesus promised 'the Spirit of truth' which would guide us into all truth (Jn 16:13). Jesus repeatedly introduced statements with the expression 'I tell you the truth' (e.g. Mt 5:18; Mk 9:1; Lk 12:37; Jn 1:51). There are hundreds of references to pursuing truth in the New Testament, and many warnings about error and deceit. Paul and Peter repeatedly stressed the need to grow in knowledge and understanding (Phil 1:9–10; Col 2:2–3; 2 Pet 1:5–9).

In today's postmodern climate, the notion of truth has fallen on hard times. But I would remind the deniers of truth that their position is self-refuting. To deny the existence of truth is itself a truth claim! Another fundamental confusion surrounding scepticism about truth is the failure to distinguish between truth as an ideal and the human search for truth. As human beings, we must be very careful about claiming to be in possession of absolute truth. We are finite, fallible and sinful beings with only a partial grasp of the truth (1 Cor 13:9, 12). But this fact should not stop us from searching for the truth. Indeed, we have an obligation to be always searching for truth.

So far I have been focussing primarily on the subjective description of what it means to love knowledge, wisdom and truth. But this is not enough; love must be translated into action. What are some practical expressions of the love of knowledge and truth? First, it should be expressed in inquisitiveness or a kind of curiosity—but not an idle curiosity which is not really serious about learning and searching for



truth.<sup>13</sup> For example, Paul describes the Athenians as spending their time ‘doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas’ (Acts 17:21). A contemporary example is the endless time many people spend surfing the internet. In contrast, children display healthy inquisitiveness when they stop to look carefully at a butterfly crossing their path or ask persistent ‘why’ questions. In fact, many adults could learn something from children about how to sincerely, honestly seek truth.

Lovers of knowledge and truth will be careful to avoid error. Paul and John urge us to ‘test everything’ and so distinguish between ‘the spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood’ (1 Thess 5:21; 1 Jn 4:1–6). Lovers of knowledge and truth will also be suspicious of hasty generalizations. They will do fact checking when claims sound a bit dubious. They will avoid conspiracy theories based on speculation. They will consult with doctors about the safety and efficacy of vaccines for COVID-19. They will be open to new ideas and arguments even when those ideas conflict with their own. Like the Bereans described in Acts 17:11, Christians will thoughtfully evaluate the sermons preached in their churches. They will do serious study of Scripture, although here we need to be realistic and not expect the layperson to be as studious as the theologian.

Lovers of knowledge and truth will diligently look for evidence for the beliefs they hold. They will display an openness to criticism of their beliefs and will be sensitive to aligning the level of confidence they display regarding their convictions with the amount of evidence they have for those beliefs. If evidence is minimal, they will be careful to say they are not entirely certain about that belief.

Here, one might object that my description of this intellectual virtue is too demanding. We are finite beings and simply cannot know everything. So at what point is a person exercising reasonable diligence in the search for truth? It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer this question, except to say that the demands of loving knowledge and truth will vary somewhat from one person to another. All of us will have to make judgements as to which beliefs are important, worthwhile and relevant to each of us, and all of us have an obligation to love knowledge and truth with regard to these beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

## Intellectual humility

Although I started with the love of knowledge and truth, one could also make a good case for intellectual humility as the most important virtue.<sup>15</sup> As already noted, the fall of Adam and Eve can be described in terms of intellectual arrogance. Therefore, overcoming this original sin might be the most important challenge we face.

13 Saint Augustine warns about this distortion when he points out that this appetite of the mind is ‘subject to a certain propensity to use the sense of the body ... for the satisfaction of its own inquisitiveness. This futile curiosity masquerades under the name of science and learning, and since it derives from our thirst for knowledge, and sight is the principal sense by which knowledge acquired, in the Scriptures it is called *gratification of the eye*’ (*Confessions*, bk. 10, ch. 35; 1 Jn 2:16—the NIV refers to ‘the lust of his eyes’).

14 See Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 155–64, for a treatment of these limitations of knowing.

15 Philip Dow, in *Virtuous Minds: Intellectual Character Development* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 70, thinks intellectual humility might be the most important virtue.

The Bible has much to say about humility and pride. There are over 100 biblical references to being humble, meek and lowly (e.g. Num 12:3; Deut 8:16; Ps 18:27; Mt 18:3–4; 1 Pet 5:5–6) and more than 150 condemnations of being arrogant, proud and haughty. Many of these are found in the Old Testament wisdom literature and the book of Isaiah (e.g. Psalm 59:12; Prov 8:13; 11:2; 13:10; 16:18; Is 2:12, 17; 13:11; 16:6; 23:9). Similar condemnations of arrogance are found in the New Testament (e.g. Mk 7:20–23; 2 Cor 12:20; 1 Jn 2:16).

Here we must be careful not to think that these general references to pride and humility preclude application to the mind or the intellect. After all, pride and humility have to do with the whole person, and so all these passages can be interpreted as making an implicit reference to intellectual pride and humility. But there are also many times where the Scriptures make more explicit reference to the concept of intellectual humility and pride.

For example, Psalm 131 is a psalm of humility: ‘My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me (v. 1). This psalm speaks of an intellect that acknowledges its limitations and is therefore humble. Proverbs 1:7 states, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge’ (Prov 1:7).<sup>16</sup> The word ‘fear’ in this context means reverence or an attitude of submission, which requires humility. In other words, a humble posture is a prerequisite for gaining knowledge.

Among the prophets, Isaiah addresses the theme of humility and pride repeatedly. For example: ‘Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight’ (Is 5:21). His vision of new heavens and a new earth includes a transformed people who display intellectual humility: ‘But this is the one I esteem, he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word’ (Is 66:2).

These same themes appear in the New Testament. Jesus explicitly prized intellectual humility in Luke 10:21: ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.’ Probably the most extended treatment of intellectual pride in the Bible is found in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians.<sup>17</sup> ‘When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God’ (1 Cor 2:1). Paul also expressed concern about our pretensions to know God and to ignore the obvious limits of human knowledge: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?’ (1 Cor 2:16). His primary target in this passage is the conceit and boasting that often typify human wisdom: ‘God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise ... so that no one may boast before him. ... Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord”’ (1 Cor 1:27, 29, 31; cf. 3:21; 4:7; 9:16). That is why Paul keeps talking about the foolishness and weakness of God, even to the point of exaggeration. It is a way of shaming the proud pretensions of human wisdom.

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16 For similar references to the fear of the Lord, see Job 28:28; Is 33:6. See also Ps 25:9; 75:4–5; Prov 11:2; 26:12 for further references to intellectual humility and pride.

17 For a good treatment of this theme in Corinthians, see Paul W. Gooch, *Partial Knowledge: Philosophical Studies in Paul* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), chapter 2.

Defining intellectual humility is harder than it might seem at first. Indeed, there is a tendency to define the concept negatively.<sup>18</sup> But I believe it is important to try to define intellectual humility in positive terms. I would say that intellectual humility involves an honest assessment of one's intellectual abilities, not too high and not too low, acknowledging that these abilities are a gift from God; a deep desire always to submit to the truth, accompanied by an ongoing willingness to admit that one might be wrong; an abiding readiness to listen and learn from others and to join with others in gaining knowledge and finding truth; and when influencing others, an awareness of the awesome responsibility of doing so, combined with a commitment always to allow those being taught to make up their own minds. This is a rather complex definition, so let me unpack some of its practical implications.

### *Fear of the Lord*

A Christian with intellectual humility bows in worship and submission before God. We have already noted Proverbs 1:7, which highlights the importance of approaching God with fear and reverence. Proverbs 3:19 states that by wisdom 'the Lord laid the earth's foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place.' So if we want to understand the principles of order that underlie all creation, we need to start with an attitude of reverent fear of the Lord. Science requires intellectual humility.

### *Submission to the authority of God's word*

God has revealed himself in Christ and in Scripture. Intellectual humility entails submission to God's word and hermeneutical humility as we approach the Bible, not sitting in judgement over God's word but letting the word judge us. James 1:21 exhorts us to 'humbly accept the word planted in you.'

### *Submission to truth and admission of error*

Persons who are intellectually humble acknowledge the existence of absolute truth and recognize that our task as human beings is to search for the truth to the best of our ability and then accept what we have found to be true, always remaining open to being proven wrong. We do not create truth; we discover it and are called to submit to it. Intellectual humility is further exemplified by a readiness to admit that sometimes we get it wrong. We are fallible creatures. Intellectual humility requires acknowledging that we often fall into error.

### *How smart am I?*

Persons who are intellectually humble have a proper estimation of their own intellectual abilities and are not overly concerned about impressing others with their intelligence. 'Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you' (Rom 12:3). We should not view ourselves as more intelligent than we

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18 For example, Roberts and Wood (*Intellectual Virtues*, 236–37, 255) begin their chapter on this virtue with an extended list of contrasting vices and their descriptions. Even when trying to give a positive definition, they end up defining intellectual humility in negative terms (250).

are, but thinking of ourselves as less intelligent than we are is equally wrong. Instead, we need to assess our intellectual abilities with sober judgement. The reference to God in Romans 12:3 is interesting. Philip Dow suggests that we will achieve a proper appraisal of our intellectual capacities and limitations only if we compare ourselves with an all-knowing and infinitely intelligent God.<sup>19</sup>

### *Interdependence*

Intellectual humility recognizes that we depend on others for much of what we know. Children learn from their parents. Students learn from their teachers. Adults continue to rely on authorities. New discoveries are always built on the shoulders of previous intellectual giants. Indeed, we need each other in order to gain knowledge and truth. We are not as autonomous as we often assume. Our interdependence also calls for a healthy respect for tradition. I would also suggest that the vice of hyper-criticism, which sadly is all too prevalent today, is an expression of intellectual arrogance.

### *Influencing others and teaching*

We all influence others by what we say and do, and this should always be done with humility. Teachers and preachers are especially concerned with influencing others, and here again humility is called for. What does it mean to teach with humility? Jesus said, ‘The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted’ (Mt 23:11). In this context, he also addressed the use of honorific titles, condemning the practice of calling certain people ‘Rabbi’ or ‘Father’ or ‘Teacher’, because ‘you have one Teacher, the Christ’ (Mt 23:8–10). Jesus was clearly trying to level the playing field in the realm of ideas. I think his rather clear command about the use of titles deserves more attention in the church today.

## **Open-mindedness**

The third important intellectual virtue I wish to consider is open-mindedness, or a willingness to form and revise one’s beliefs and convictions in the light of available evidence and argument, especially in cases where there are opposing beliefs, arguments or bodies of evidence. Closed-mindedness involves an unwillingness to do the same. A related intellectual vice is dogmatism, which involves an arrogant assertion of opinion or belief that arises from a disposition of closed-mindedness.

The concept of closed-mindedness is also prominent in Scripture. David links callous hearts with arrogance (Ps 17:10). Isaiah repeatedly speaks of ears that do not hear and eyes that do not see (Is 6:9–10; 35:5; 42:20; 43:8; 44:18). By way of contrast, he describes a kingdom of righteousness where kings rule with justice, individuals feel safe, and people have open minds: ‘Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who hear will listen. The mind of the rash will know and understand, and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear. No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be highly respected’ (Is 32:1–5).

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19 Dow, *Virtuous Minds*, 71–72.

Jesus, when explaining the parable of the sower to his disciples, drew on Isaiah to provide a penetrating analysis of a closed mind: 'You will be ever hearing, but never understanding; you will be ever seeing, but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them' (Mt 13:14–15; Is 6:9–10; cf. Acts 28:26–27). Jesus, like Isaiah, bemoaned the people's inability to really hear God's message. Even their eyes were prevented from seeing things in proper perspective. At the root of such closed-mindedness were hearts that did not allow ears, eyes and minds to function properly.

Jesus' encounter with the Emmaus disciples after his resurrection (Lk 24:13–35) provides an example of closed minds that were eventually opened. Jesus chastises the two men for being rather 'foolish' and 'slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken' (v. 25). He then gives them a long lecture reviewing how the Scriptures pointed to his death and resurrection. But the two still do not grasp the lesson until Jesus breaks bread and gives thanks. Only then 'their eyes were opened' (v. 31). And only then did the two realize that their 'hearts were burning within' them while Jesus was explaining the Scriptures to them (v. 32). They recognized the strain associated with closed minds being reluctantly opened.

Paul similarly draws on Old Testament writers to describe eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear (Rom 11:7–10; cf. Deut 29:4; Is 29:10). He speaks of the godless and wicked as suppressing the truth that can be known about God in nature (Rom 1:18). 'The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ' (2 Cor 4:4). Finally, in Revelation 2–3, each of the letters to the seven churches in the province of Asia concludes with a plea: 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Rev 2:7; 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

The Bible speaks about open-mindedness mainly in terms of a willingness to really listen to God and to change one's mind in the light of new revelation. But there are hints of a broader application to all areas, not just religious truth. The problem of closed-mindedness is colorfully described in terms of men and women creating intellectual silos, gathering 'around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear' (2 Tim 4:3). The problem of closed minds extends well beyond religious truth. All of us must cultivate open-mindedness in all areas of knowledge and truth.

There are a number of current misconceptions surrounding open-mindedness. For example, there is a danger of equating open-mindedness with empty-mindedness. The error here is that there are no empty minds. We all have convictions and perspectives, and a coherent definition of open-mindedness must do justice to this fact. We all have deeply held convictions, but we must be open to re-evaluating them. I like to call this stance 'committed openness'.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, there is also a danger of becoming too open-minded. G. K. Chesterton, in his *Autobiography*, describes H. G. Wells as a man who 'reacted too swiftly to everything', who was 'a permanent reactionary', and who never seemed

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20 See Elmer John Thiessen, 'Teaching for Committed Openness', in *Cultivating Inquiry Across the Curriculum*, ed. Kim A. Winsor (Lexington, MA: Lexington Christian Academy, 2008): 159–85.

able to reach firm or settled conclusions of his own. Chesterton adds, ‘I think he thought that the object of opening the mind is simply opening the mind. Whereas I am incurably convinced that the object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.’<sup>21</sup> We need a definition of open-mindedness that aims at commitment and truth.

There is a place for being committed to settled convictions. Jesus warned about a time when ‘many will turn away from the faith’ and commended the one ‘who stands firm to the end’ (Mt 24:10, 13; cf. Lk 21:19). Paul also cautioned against being ‘tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching’ (Eph 4:14). We do not wish to fall prey to the vice of intellectual flabbiness, which Paul aptly described in terms of men and women who are ‘always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth’ (2 Tim 3:7). Closely related is the intellectual vice of hyper-criticism, exemplified by Chesterton’s friend who was a ‘permanent reactionary’.<sup>22</sup> Paul also warned about an ‘unhealthy interest in controversies’ and ‘foolish and useless arguments’ which once again prevent us from coming to settled conclusions (1 Tim 6:4; 2 Tim 2:23; Titus 3:9). On the contrary, stability in our firm commitment to the basic teachings of the gospel should characterize the mature believer (1 Cor 15:2; 16:13; Eph 6:14; Phil 2:16; Col 1:23; 2 Thess 2:15). However, we can also be too firm in how we hold and articulate our beliefs; this is the vice of intellectual closed-mindedness, leading in turn to dogmatism. Both of these vices also involve a failure of intellectual humility. We need a delicate balance between holding convictions and humble openness to reevaluating our convictions when we encounter new evidence and arguments. This balance can be helpfully described as having a ‘proper confidence’ in our beliefs.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

We are facing a crisis today, a crisis of the mind. Alan Jacobs, in *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*, gives a depressing account of the state of thinking today. Jacobs says we suffer from a settled determination to avoid thinking. We don’t listen well because we are often in ‘refutation mode’, trying to refute the speaker rather than digesting his or her comments thoughtfully and then pausing to assess what we have heard.<sup>24</sup> Rigidity of mind is also common, reinforced by group-think and social media.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, we are entrenched in irresolvable disagreements about nearly everything. Sadly, these disagreements and growing polarizations typify the church as well. We have disagreements about doctrine and church practice. We are polarized over homosexuality and gay marriage. Christian families and churches are strongly divided over COVID-19 vaccinations. American churches are waging a divisive debate about critical race theory.

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21 G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1937), 223–24.

22 See my article, ‘Question-Focused Faith’, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461ejt>.

23 See Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

24 Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds* (New York: Currency, 2017), 18.

25 Jacobs, *How to Think*, chapter 2.

Even more sadly, we are at a loss as to what to do about all this. We think that more education, more information, more facts, and more evidence and argument will solve the problem. But all this does not seem to help. So we stay clear of any controversial topics in our interactions with family, friends and fellow church members.

The idea that more education will help to resolve our differences rests on the assumption that we are rational beings. But we are not as rational as we think.

We need to shift gears. We need less focus on traditional epistemology and more focus on the ethics of believing and knowing. We need less argument and debate, and more focus on the character of the arguers and debaters. We need less emphasis on knowledge and more on how we come to know. The church needs to concentrate on developing the intellectual virtues of its members. How to do so is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>26</sup> But we definitely need to become better known for our intellectual humility. We need to be open to changing our minds and to examining our current beliefs in the light of Scripture. We need to believe in the ideal of truth and to be passionate in our search for knowledge and truth, while at the same time remaining humble about our imperfect grasp of the truth.

A focus on intellectual virtues and vices will also help us determine whom we should listen to, a question that is central to a biblical epistemology.<sup>27</sup> Humility requires us to bow before the authority of God and his Word. At a human level, we need to listen to those people who are genuinely and humbly searching for the truth. In terms of Paul's discussion of the Spirit-filled life, we need to listen especially to church members and leaders who are filled with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). This fruit is surely a good sign that an individual possesses intellectual virtues.

The practice of the intellectual virtues of open-mindedness, humility and an honest search for truth will guide the church towards being 'of the same mind, having the same love, being united in spirit, and having the same purpose' (Phil 2:2). May God help us to become such a people.

*See the next page for a self-evaluation tool on intellectual virtues.*

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26 Oxenham, 'A Renaissance of Character and Virtue', parts 3 and 4, provides some suggestions with regard to the development of moral virtues which could be extrapolated to the cultivation of intellectual virtues. See also Richard L. Smith, *Such a Mind as This: A Biblical-Theological Study of Thinking in the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), and the last section of his article in this issue.

27 Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing: A Scriptural Epistemology of Error* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013); Smith, *Such a Mind as This*.

### **A self-evaluation tool on intellectual virtues**

For each of the following statements, answer yes, no, or unsure/maybe.

1. I worry about coming to the Bible with preconceived ideas and often make it a point to pray that when I read the Scriptures I will allow them to challenge my current beliefs.
2. I welcome criticisms of my beliefs.
3. I readily admit that I am wrong when I discover that I have an incorrect belief.
4. I regularly read newspapers, books and articles articulating political, social and religious viewpoints that run counter to my own convictions.
5. I am very concerned about falling prey to accepting fake news or unsubstantiated conspiracy theories and make it a point to test claims that sound suspicious.
6. I never resort to bad-mouthing people I disagree with.
7. I feel strongly that my beliefs need to align with an objective reality that lies beyond my mind and my current opinions.
8. I spend little time surfing the internet and simply perusing what catches my interest.
9. I delight in sharing what I have come to know with others. Indeed, on important matters, I feel I have an obligation to do so.
10. Although I value the need to think critically about beliefs, I readily admit that belief comes before doubt, and that it is possible to become too preoccupied with being critical and sceptical.

Score your answers as 1 for yes, 0.5 for unsure/maybe, and 0 for no. What is your total score? Please note that this questionnaire has been prepared by a philosopher, not a social scientist, so the score has no scientific validity. But the exercise should help you think about how much you care about the intellectual virtues described in this essay.



# Such a Heart as This: The Intellectual Implications of Deuteronomy 5:29

Richard L. Smith

*Contrary to the frequent Christian tendency to devalue intellectual pursuits, Richard L. Smith finds an emphasis on loving God with the mind throughout the Old Testament. This excerpt from his new book shows how God communicates this message through Deuteronomy.*

When someone begins a sentence with the word ‘oh!’ they express something important, a very deep longing or concern. When God Almighty uses this expression, he says something essential.

Three times God utters his earnest desire about human intellectuality with the conjunction *lu*, meaning ‘if’ or ‘oh that.’ These statements follow below. (The important terms are in italics.)

Oh, that they were *wise*, that they *understood* this, that they would *consider* their latter end! (Deut 32:29)

Oh, that my people would *listen to me*, that Israel would walk in my ways! (Ps 81:13)

Oh that you had *paid attention* to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. (Is 48:18)

Each verse expresses divine longing about the mind. Deuteronomy 32 highlights the importance of critical thought and analysis. Psalm 81 underscores a prominent theme in Old Testament epistemology—the absolute necessity of listening to the voice of the Lord alone.<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 48 emphasizes mental discipline that produces obedience. Each verse indicates that acquired wisdom and discernment impact our lives in tangible ways: our future (‘their latter end’), manner of life (‘walk in my ways’) and well-being (‘peace like a river’).

Another instance of divine longing with reference to intellectuality is Deuteronomy 5:29. Let us read this verse in its immediate context:

‘For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived? Go near and hear all that

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<sup>1</sup> The preceding two verses of Psalm 81 make this abundantly clear: ‘But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels’ (vv. 11–12).

the Lord our God will say, and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.' And the Lord heard your words, when you spoke to me. And the Lord said to me, 'I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!'

In this passage, Moses recounted God's theophany with Israel at Horeb, when he wrote the Ten Commandments and initiated his covenant (Ex 20:18–21). The people were utterly terrified and feared for their lives when they perceived God's dramatic appearance. Moses explained, though, that God's motive was not destructive, but pedagogical and pastoral. He told them, 'Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin' (20:20).

Now, as the second generation was about to renew the covenant before entering the land of Canaan, Moses disclosed God's approbation of their forefathers' positive mindset at that moment: 'They are right in all that they have spoken' (Deut 5:28b). He also revealed God's great desire for them to retain their godly outlook (v. 29a): 'Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments.'

Two terms in this verse merit special attention. First, the pronoun 'oh' (*mi*) is quite instructive. Sometimes, this term indicates the optative mood, expressing a wistful desire or future wish, and is translated as 'if only', 'would that', or 'oh'. At other times, *mi* means 'who' and appears in rhetorical questions that indicate unattainable desire, at least from a human perspective. Daniel I. Block explains God's desire with 'an awkward optative question' in Deuteronomy 5:29: 'Who will grant and they will have this their heart?' The query is an idiomatic expression of God's epistemic desire, 'Oh that they had such a heart as this!'<sup>2</sup> The Lord knew that shortly his people would refuse to heed his counsel. Nevertheless, what is unattainable for man is not for Yahweh. In verse 29, he expressed his goal for human understanding—a mindset that feared God. Block summarizes the Lord's outlook: 'Yahweh acknowledged that he overheard the people's request to Moses (cf. 5:28) and affirmed their response. He also expressed his wish that the Israelites would never lose their present reverential disposition toward him.'<sup>3</sup>

Second, the word 'heart' (*leb*) in 5:29 is often a stand-in for 'mind' (or mindset). Peter C. Craigie renders 'heart' as 'mind' in the optative mood, 'Would that they were continually of this mind', as does the NRSV, 'If only they had a mind such as this always.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the immediate context of the passage underscores an epistemological setting with the terms 'voice', 'wrote', 'heard', 'seen', 'teach', and 'speak', as well as knowledge vocabulary ('words', 'statutes', 'rules', 'commandments') and argumentation (human in vv. 24–27 and divine in vv. 28–29). Within the broader context of Deuteronomy, terms of cognition also appear in connection with 'heart': 'depart from your heart' and 'forget' (4:9; 8:14), 'know then

2 Daniel I. Block, 'A Place for My Name: Horeb and Zion in the Mosaic Vision for Hebrew Worship', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 2 (2015): 230 note 32.

3 Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 176.

4 Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 165.

in your heart' (8:5), 'these words' and 'on/in your heart' (6:6; 11:18), 'say in your heart' indicating both spoken and unspoken thoughts (7:17; 9:4; 15:9; 18:21), and a 'heart to understand' (29:4).

The expression 'such a heart [mind] as this', therefore, may be defined as a mentality that presumed godly fear and obedience. Indeed, a pious epistemic posture embraces the threefold counsel of Proverbs 3:7: 'Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.' In the following sections, I summarize five aspects of right thinking from the book of Deuteronomy.

### A mind that fears

The divine intent of 'such a heart as this always' is coupled with the conjunction 'that' (*maan*) in 5:29b: 'that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!' Five times God's intent, as indicated by 'that' (*maan*), focused on acquiring the fear of the Lord (5:29; 6:2; and 'learn to fear the Lord' in 14:23; 17:19; 31:12). In addition, the particle 'that' (*asher*) appears in 4:10 with this significance: 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that (*asher*) they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that (*asher*) they may teach their children so.'

Similarly, Deuteronomy 10:12–13 expresses God's didactic purpose. Moses asked, 'And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you?' The answer positions four verbs in apposition with 'fear', so as to associate it with the Lord's overall purpose for Israel, which is thematically akin to Deuteronomy 5:29:

To fear	the Lord your God,
To walk	in all his ways,
To love	him,
To serve	the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul,
To keep	the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good.

In Deuteronomy, then, God-fearers were typified by an intellectual acknowledgement of God's voice: 'my words' (4:10), 'commandments' (5:29), 'statutes' (6:2, 24), and 'all the words of this law written in this book' (28:58). Behaviourally, those who possessed a heart that fears 'serve' and 'swear' by the Lord's name (6:13), 'walk in his ways' (8:6), 'hold fast to him' (10:20), 'obey his voice' (13:4), 'read' God's word (17:19), and 'purge evil' from their midst (21:21). These intellectual and performative criteria amplify the idiomatic expression cited by Moses in Exodus 20:20, 'that the fear of him may be upon your faces' (or 'be before you'). John I. Durham renders the expression as 'be always before you, on your mind'.<sup>5</sup> The phrase indicates that the fear of the Lord should 'always be before them as a constant preoccupation of mind'.<sup>6</sup>

5 John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 302.

6 Durham, *Exodus*, 303.

## A mind that listens

When God spoke to Israel, the verb *shama* was often utilized, translated as ‘listen to’, ‘hear’, or ‘obey’. The command to pay attention appears in every genre of the Old Testament, with a multitude of objects:

Listen to	‘the words of the Lord your God’ (Josh 3:9), ‘the words of the Lord’ (1 Sam 15:1), ‘all that I command you’ (1 Kgs 11:38), ‘the voice of my teachers’ (Prov 5:13), ‘the words of my servants the prophets’ (Jer 26:5), ‘their judges’ (Judg 2:17), ‘me’ (Ps 81:8)
Obey	‘the voice of the Lord your God’ (Zech 6:15), ‘the voice of his word’ (Ps 103:20), ‘the voice of his servant’ (Is 50:10), ‘the voice of Samuel’ (1 Sam 8:19), ‘your commandments’ (Neh 9:16), ‘my/his/ your voice’ (Judg 6:10)
Hear	‘the instruction of the Lord’ (Is 30:9), ‘the words of your mouth’ (Ps 138:4), ‘the word of the Lord’ (Is 66:5), ‘instruction’ (Prov 8:33), ‘my words’ (Prov 4:10), ‘my/his voice’ (Is 32:9)

The word *shama* appears often with a particular direct object, ‘voice’ (*qol*). Dru Johnson points out that the idiom ‘listen to the voice of’ (*shama qol*) indicates ‘acknowledging someone as having authority and then enacting his or her authoritative instructions’.<sup>7</sup> The expression ‘listen to the voice of the Lord your God’ communicates his transcendent perspective and authority to his vassal rulers, builders, benefactors and thinkers. In a positive sense, the idiom appears in Exodus 15:26: ‘If you diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his eyes’, then he would ‘put none of the diseases’ upon Israel that the Egyptians suffered. Similarly, the failure to listen to the ‘voice of the Lord’ occurs in a negative sense eight times in contexts of disobedience.<sup>8</sup>

In Deuteronomy, the phrase ‘listen to/obey/hear the voice of the Lord/Lord your God’ appears many times. This expression and its various objects are listed below:

Obey the voice of the Lord/Lord your God	20	Listen to the command of the Lord	1
Obey his voice	6	Listen to my words	1
Obey the commandments of the Lord your God	2	Listen to the voice of a prophet	1
Obey all these words	1	Listen to my words	1
Obey the priest	1	Listen ... to a prophet like me	1
Obey the voice of his father	1	Listen to parents	1
Listen to your voice	1	Hear the statutes and rules	1
Listen to me	1	Hear the voice/of the Lord God	2
Listen to the statutes and rules	2	Hear the voice	3

<sup>7</sup> Dru Johnson, *Epistemology and Biblical Theology: From the Pentateuch to Mark’s Gospel* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 42.

<sup>8</sup> See Josh 5:6; 1 Sam 12:15; 15:19, 22; 28:18; 1 Kgs 20:36; 2 Kgs 18:12; Ps 106:25.

Deuteronomy 4:35–40 provides four reasons for listening to God’s voice through Moses that amplify Deuteronomy 5:26–29. The four motivations are in italics:

To you it was shown, *that you might know that the Lord is God*; there is no other besides him. Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, *that he might discipline you*. And on earth he let you see his great fire, and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire. And because he loved your fathers and chose their offspring after them and brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power, driving out before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in, to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is this day, know therefore today, and *lay it to your heart*, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, *that it may go well with you* and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time.

First, the phrase ‘that you might know that the Lord is God’ underscores God’s intent to instruct his people. He also reaffirms his sovereignty over knowledge due to human finitude and fallenness. This passage highlights God’s epistemic grace given for Israel’s understanding through revelation: ‘to you it was shown’ (v. 35), ‘let you hear his voice’ (v. 36a), and ‘let you see his great fire and hear his words’ (v. 36b).

Second, the phrase ‘that he might discipline you’ indicates didactic purpose. The term ‘discipline’ translates the verb *yasar*. In some cases, the word indicates physical punishment for immoral conduct (22:18). But the better context to understand *yasar* in 4:36 is its use in 8:5, ‘As a man disciplines (*yasar*) his son, the Lord your God disciplines (*yasar*) you.’ Discipline occurred within a filial relationship that was intended for good and to produce holiness and understanding, resulting in blessing (8:2–3). In this setting, then, ‘humbling’ and ‘testing’ (v. 2) are approximate synonyms for discipline. God’s motive was to determine ‘what was in your heart’. His discipline was designed to demonstrate the necessity of listening.

Third, the expression ‘lay it to your heart’ conveys an epistemological nuance. The verb rendered as ‘lay it to’ is *shub* (‘turn’, ‘return’, ‘restore’, ‘bring back’). In this setting, the meaning is ‘do not let your mind forget’, ‘call them to mind’ (30:1), or simply ‘remember.’ This significance is similar to 11:18, ‘You shall therefore lay up (*sum*) these words of mine in your heart and in your soul.’ In this context (v. 39), the idiom indicates that remembering or re-listening to God’s word is motivated by repentance in the midst of chastisement.

Fourth, the clause ‘that it may go well with you’ indicates God’s intention to prosper his people in the land of Canaan according to his promise—on condition of covenantal compliance.

Blessing was the fruit of obedience and the appropriate application of heeding God’s voice. Moses told Israel, ‘Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for all time’ (4:40). Indeed, the long list of blessings derived from obedience in Deuteronomy 28:1–14 defined what ‘that it may go well with you’ really meant: an optimal life in the post-fall world.

## A mind that learns

Yahweh wanted Israel to perceive reality. He desired them to discern their true condition: their dependency and vulnerability as finite and fallen creatures. He wanted them to understand essential ontological and redemptive truths. He valued knowledge acquisition and utilized the verbs 'know' (*yada*) and 'hear' (*shama*) to communicate theological content. For instance, he taught the Hebrews monotheism: 'To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him' (4:35). He contrasted himself with the local divinities (henotheism): 'The Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other' (4:39; see also 6:4). He also explained covenantal realities such as his loving faithfulness (5:6; 7:9), fatherly discipline (8:5) and law (5:1).

One especially important truth was the transcendental necessity of divine revelation and sustenance in 8:1–3. Verse 3b expresses Yahweh's pedagogical aim (italicized):

The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the Lord swore to give to your fathers. And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but *man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*

In this passage, Moses underscored the great lesson God taught Israel through their wilderness journey and his miraculous supply of food and water. But he reminded them that 'man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (v. 3b). The historical context indicates discursive and non-discursive communication, both words and deeds. Regarding the latter, Yahweh communicated through his 'discipline' in the wilderness (v. 5) by means of 'humbling', 'testing', and sustenance ('clothing did not wear out', v. 4). Raymond C. Van Leeuwen points out that the Lord spoke through 'the realm of history (exodus [in v. 14]) and in nature (water from rock [in v. 15])'.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the expression 'his mouth' sometimes indicates communication without words. For instance, from his mouth come wind (Job 15:30), a 'rumbling' (Job 37:2), 'devouring fire' (Ps 18:8), and his 'breath' that kills (Is 11:4). Lamentations 3:38 asks, 'Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?'

On the other hand, the phrase 'his [the Lord's] mouth' is frequently associated with speech. From 'his mouth' (Moses speaking for Yahweh) come 'my words' (Deut 18:18), 'instruction', and 'words from his mouth' (Job 22:22), as well as 'wisdom' with 'knowledge' and 'understanding' (Prov 2:6). Job 23:12 is thematically similar to Deuteronomy 8:3: 'I have not departed from the commandment of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my portion of food.' In the broader context of chapter 8, God spoke through Moses his 'commandment' (vv. 1, 2, 6),

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<sup>9</sup> Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, 'What Comes Out of God's Mouth: The Theological Wordplay in Deuteronomy 8', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 57.

‘rules’ and ‘statutes’ (v. 11), and his ‘covenant that he swore to your fathers’ (v. 18). In fact, Moses warned that Israel would perish if they did not ‘obey the voice of the Lord’ (v. 20).

The verb ‘live’ (*hayah* in 8:1) conveys a dual significance. On one hand, the term refers to physical existence and survival. Supply of food and water (vv. 15–16), protection (v. 15), sustenance (v. 4), and deliverance from oppression (v. 14) presume God’s power. On the other hand, the term ‘live’ refers to a quality of existence that occurs by keeping ‘the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him’ (v. 6). In fact, verses 7–10 depict Canaan as a new Eden, where Israel would flourish—if they obeyed.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the mindset that the Lord desired for his people included the realization that everything revealed by God in words spoken (Torah) and unspoken (redemptive deeds) was the presupposition of their existence—in fact, the necessary preconditions for their very understanding. God’s voice enabled Israel to thrive and also held them to account for disobedience. A principal purpose of the wilderness experience, therefore, was to acquire this critical knowledge gained through privation and disorientation: listen to God’s voice and obey in order to thrive and flourish.

### **A mind that is vigilant**

A vigilant mind shares God’s passion for his instructions and objectives. Such an outlook listens acutely and implements resolutely. Epistemic vigilance implies a mindset that is zealous, attentive and thorough with respect to oneself, family, community and those outside the covenant. A vigilant mind presumes situational awareness. It discerns dangers in one’s thinking, desire and behaviour, as well as internal threats within the community and external threats from other worldviews.

A vigilant thinker fulfils God’s commandments with utmost thoroughness. He cares for his soul ‘diligently’, so that he does not ‘forget’ all that God did for Israel (4:9). He ‘strictly obeys’ what the Lord has communicated (15:5) and ‘diligently keeps’ his law (6:17). He teaches his children ‘diligently’ (6:7). He serves the Lord and advances his cause with total devotion, with ‘all of the heart and soul’ (4:29; 6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 13:3; 26:16; 30:6, 10). Vigilance also applies to specifically intellectual tasks such as investigations concerning covenant violation and apostasy (13:14; 17:4; 19:18). Similarly, vigilant minds proactively ‘remember’ that they ‘were slaves in the land of Egypt’ (5:15), ‘what the Lord did to Pharaoh’ (7:18), ‘the whole way God has led you’ (8:2), that God gives ‘power to get wealth’ (8:18), and how they ‘provoked the Lord your God to wrath’ (9:7).

Furthermore, the word ‘all’ (*kol*, as well as the variations ‘with all’, ‘in all’, ‘to all’, and ‘that all’) occurs frequently, indicating the full scope to which vigilance must extend. Temporally speaking, listening to the Lord’s voice and observing his law

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10 The Old Testament depicts the Promised Land as a potential new Eden, a sacred precinct in the midst of vast profane territory. Like Eden, which was a ‘good land’ blessed by God (Gen 1:10, 12), Canaan was a ‘good land’ promised to the Hebrew tribes by their Redeemer (Ex 3:8; Deut 4:21; Josh 23:13). It was a place of peace and plenty where everyone could ‘eat and be full’ (Deut 8:10, 12; 14:29; Ps 104:28; Is 66:11–13). It was also a land of prosperity where all enjoyed the bounty of God and ‘lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree’ (1 Kgs 4:25).

must continue ‘all the days of your life’ (4:9; 12:1; 16:3; 17:19). The required actions include ‘all the things that you should do’ (1:18), teaching children and grandchildren (4:9–10), ‘walking in all the way the Lord your God commanded’ (5:33), paying tithes and offerings (12:11), attending festivals (12:18; 16:3, 16; 17:10), and ‘all that you undertake’ (12:18). Conceptually, this included knowing and doing ‘all my commandments’ (5:29), ‘statutes and rules’ (11:32), ‘the words of this law that are written in this book’ (28:58), and ‘what is right and good in the sight of the Lord’ (6:18; 12:25). Significantly, vigilance applies to the depth and breadth of God’s commands: the ‘whole commandment’ (5:31; 8:1; 11:8; 31:5) and ‘whole way’ (8:2).

Similarly, words derived from *shamar* appear as the injunctions ‘take care’, be ‘careful’, and the adverb ‘carefully’, indicating a mindset that is focused and attentive. One must ‘learn’ and ‘be careful to do’ God’s statutes (5:1), so that one does not ‘forget’ (4:23) and become ‘ensnared’ by idolatry (12:30). Likewise, *shamar* coupled with idioms of the ‘heart’ urges careful self-observation lest God’s words ‘depart from your heart’ (4:9), ‘your heart be deceived’ (11:16), or the people harbour an ‘unworthy thought in your heart’ (15:9) or fail to ‘take to heart’ the Lord’s commands (32:46). Especially critical was the obligation to be ‘careful’ about revelation and never ‘add to’ (syncretism) or ‘take from’ (diminish) God’s word (12:32).

Mental vigilance and the prevention of idolatry are contrasted with forgetting and disobedience. This can be displayed by the following diagram summarizing the use of *shamar* plus *pen* in Deuteronomy 4:

<i>Verse</i>	<i>Shamar</i>	<i>Pen</i>	<i>Theme or Action</i>
9	take care keep	lest lest	forget the things your eyes have seen they depart from your heart
15	watch very carefully		since you saw no form
16	beware (implied)	lest	act corruptly by making a carved image
19	beware (implied)	lest	lift your eyes to heaven, be drawn away, bow down, serve them
23	take care	lest	forget the covenant make an image

Clearly, the vigilant mind resists the tendency to ignore what is most important (God’s voice) and embrace what is most destructive (idolatry). But even when one falls into idolatry and suffers exile (4:28), true worship can occur again through repentance with due diligence: ‘if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul’ (v. 29).

Furthermore, the vigilant mind interprets current challenges in light of the big picture and within its proper theological context (4:31–40). First, Israel understood its moment in history within God’s story beginning with creation (v. 32), his promise to the fathers (vv. 31, 37), the covenant at Sinai (vv. 33, 38) and the deliverance from Egypt (v. 34). The thoughtful mind remembered where they had come from, where they were now, where they were going, and why. In fact, shortly before Moses died,



he restated Israel's need to think about the present and future with reference to the past. He said, 'Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess' (32:46–47). In this regard, Ryan O'Dowd comments:

The implication for Israel is that the knowledge of Yahweh, of his activity in history, and of his universal uniqueness are the foundation of her knowledge of the world. ... That this same union of creation and salvation events is used to justify Yahweh's uniqueness in 32:39–43—and his concern for the testimony of the nations (32:27)—reinforces the fact that epistemology is grounded in the ontology of divine presence and divine power and the ethics of obedience.<sup>11</sup>

Second, those with attentive mindsets understood divine election as conditioned by obedience and disobedience. Nathan McDonald comments, 'The two sides of election are summarized in YHWH's nature as both the 'jealous el' [God] and the 'merciful el' (4:24, 31; cf. 7:6–10).'<sup>12</sup> He describes the inevitable result when Israel did not listen to the voice of the Lord: 'When a different vision is accepted, Israel is unable to obey the guiding voice of YHWH.'<sup>13</sup>

Third, the vigilant mind viewed the spiritual marketplace in Canaan from an elenctic perspective (4:32–38). It interpreted the conquest and settlement as a clash of worldviews—between monotheism and henotheism (vv. 35, 39).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the nation discovered that their election was rooted in this polemical objective: 'To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him' (v. 35).

Fourth, they interpreted covenant renewal and entrance into the land with this theoretical construct: indicative ontological fact produces imperative ethical obligation. Verses 39 and 40 summarize the rationale: 'Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today.'

### A mind that loves

The creedal nucleus of Deuteronomy is the *Shema* of 6:4–5, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole being, and with your whole strength' (New

11 Ryan O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 42.

12 Nathan McDonald, 'The Literary Criticism and Rhetorical Logic of Deut 1–4', *Vetus Testamentum* 56, no. 2 (2006): 218.

13 McDonald, 'The Literary Criticism and Rhetorical Logic', 222.

14 Craig C. Bartholomew and Ryan O'Dowd summarize Deuteronomy's elenctic impact in light of the fear of God: 'Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, the "fear of Yahweh" similarly represents total devotion to God as the heart of Israel's "true" religion. ... What must be recognized is that above all else about this phrase—the fear of Yahweh—is the radical nature of Israel's ethical monotheism among her polytheistic neighbors.' *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 25.

American Bible Revised Edition). The theological significance of this text cannot be overstated, but the epistemological import is also critical. The *Shema* depicts with upmost clarity ‘such a mind as this’—the mindset that God desires for his servants. The text shows the centrality of the mind in Old Testament spirituality and reveals how thinking covenantally impacts every area of life.

In Deuteronomy 4–6, and in 6:4–5 particularly, an emphatic ‘Hear, O Israel’ summons the people to listen and obey. The pattern of indicative truth and imperative response may be summarized in this way:

<i>Indicative</i>	<i>Conjunction</i>	<i>Imperative</i>
there is no other (4:35, 39)	Therefore	keep his commandments (v. 40)
I am the Lord (5:6)	(implied)	no other gods before me (v. 7)
the Lord alone (6:4)	Therefore	love the Lord with your whole heart (v. 5)

Verse 5 specifies the expected response to the declaration in verse 4—love (*ahab*). From the perspective of ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties, ‘love’ was a legal term indicating the covenantal loyalty of a vassal state. Love was a demand imposed by the superior and required a decision by the inferior: a pragmatic choice based upon careful assessment of the vassal’s political, military and economic vulnerability. Love was also a commitment not to undermine the suzerain by affiliating with opposing powers. However, love involved an affective dimension. The reigning power attempted to win the hearts and minds of subjugated peoples through ruling theocracy, its pantheon and its ideology.<sup>15</sup> Most became enablers who facilitated the extension of the suzerain’s rule over other backward and wayward nations through conquest and annexation.

From the perspective of the Old Testament, though, covenantal love assumed similar but also contrasting dimensions. On one hand, given the divine indicative and the testimony of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, love was a demand for loyalty and obedience to the transcendent suzerain’s demands. Faithfulness to Yahweh meant that Israel would not divert allegiance to other gods and their national domains. It meant that the Israelites would not learn to think like Canaanites. Love, therefore, entailed a rational decision to choose faithfulness over apostasy, life over death, and blessing over woe (28:1–2, 15; 30:19).

On the other hand, love also entailed an emotional aspect. First, love arose from gratitude for the abundant grace bestowed on Israel as God’s treasured possession. Block writes:

The Lord, their divine Suzerain, who by grace had rescued them from the bondage of Egypt, and who by grace had called Israel to covenant relationship with Himself, and who by grace was calling on them to represent Him to the

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15 With reference to the propaganda mechanisms and the mentality of empire of later imperial powers in the ninth to the sixth centuries BC, see Shawn Zelig Aster, ‘Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims to Judah in the Late Eighth Century BCE’, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 78 (2007): 1–44; Douglas K. Stuart, ‘David’s Costly Flirtation with Empire’, in *Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 17–53.

world, retained the exclusive right to define the appropriate response to the grace He had lavished on them. Total acceptance of the will of the divine Benefactor would be the correct and reasonable response.<sup>16</sup>

Second, love was a response in kind, a form of divine imitation.<sup>17</sup> The Lord had clearly demonstrated his affection for and faithfulness to Israel through their calling, deliverance, sustenance and law (4:37; 7:13; 10:15). Moreover, he carefully planned their well-being, so that they would flourish in Canaan. He demonstrated benevolent intentionality toward Israel as their suzerain. He had saved them from bondage and did not subjugate them by brute force, unlike the nations that attacked one another for spoils and glory. Thus, Israel's duty was to mimic Yahweh's intentionality as stewards and image bearers, seeking his glory on earth and the best interests of their countrymen as a testimony to the nations (4:6). To do this, they need to reason like covenant servants.

The word 'heart' (*leb*), as we have seen, denotes more than emotions and often refers to the mind.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the heart functions, as it were, as an epistemic rudder for the soul. Michael Carasik depicts the heart as the 'organ of knowing and understanding'.<sup>19</sup> It includes the mental capacity to receive, inventory and evaluate data. When it functions well, the heart acquires critical understanding. In epistemological terms, it 'knows that' (i.e., facts about God and the world), 'knows how' (learning in relationship), 'knows why' (teleology and obligation), 'knows who' (knowledge derived from and oriented to God), and 'knows where' (knowledge situated by God through creation and covenant). With reference to the *Shema* (in 6:4–5 and chapters 4–8 generally), 'such a heart as this' discerns an essential ontological fact: there is only one God—Yahweh Elohim—and that thinking must be conditioned by covenantal love.

The term 'soul' (*nepesh*) appears in the Old Testament with a range of meanings, depending on the context. *Nepesh* includes the imagination and curiosity. In many settings, however, such as the *Shema*, it also refers to desire—physical, psychological and spiritual. As such, the 'soul' is associated with longing, motivation and passion. The soul curates one's deepest motives (often hidden or unknown), real aspirations, and what one is willing to do (rightly and wrongly). For this reason, Paul Overland adds that "'to love God with the soul" means to advance one's devotion to God beyond all longings of a mental or physical sort."<sup>20</sup>

'Strength' (*meod*) in this context conveys an economic nuance: stewardship of wealth, capacity or resources. The Israelites were obligated to use all with which God had endowed them—material assets, economic prowess, physical capacity, social capital, personal gifting and intellectual ability—for his honour and human well-

16 Block, 'The Grace of Torah: The Mosaic Prescription for Life (Deut 4:1–8; 6:20–25)', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 8.

17 O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 45–46.

18 Its provenance is difficult to capture in English, for as Bruce K. Waltke explains, 'No other English word combines the complex interplay of intellect, sensibility, and will.' In fact, there is no Hebrew term for 'mind'. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs, Chapters 1–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 91.

19 Michael Carasik, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 106.

20 Paul Overland, 'Did the Sage Draw from the Shema? A Study of Proverbs 3:1–12', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (2000): 429.

being alone. Thus, loving God with all one's might meant that nothing could be withheld for egoistic or secular motives or rededicated to an illicit religious affiliation.

The threefold 'all' (or 'whole' *kol*) indicated that every aspect of life should be fully engaged in loving God with covenantal fidelity. To love God according to the *Shema* entailed a life dedicated to *divina imitatio*: imitating God's thoughts, motives and beneficence in accord with creational and covenantal norms. Similarly, to love others required God-oriented thinking, desire and conduct.

Scholars have noted, however, a phenomenological pattern associated with 6:4–5.<sup>21</sup> The process implies listening, learning and application. A mind informed by revelation generated godly motivation (the fear of God) and fostered stewardship that demonstrated love in action. In other words, the *Shema* shows the centrality of the mind and how thinking covenantally impacts every area of life. The mind, desire and capacity—in that order—should be dedicated to the Lord. This principle can be illustrated by the following diagram:

mind/heart → motive/soul → capacity/might

In summary, in chapters 4–8 vassals of Yahweh's kingdom learned about their suzerain and what he expected from them intellectually and existentially. They discovered how to use their minds profitably as apprentice rulers, architects, economists and philosophers in Israel. They learned what walking in his ways, keeping his statutes and heeding his voice meant epistemologically. In these ways, they nurtured minds that served the one and only Lord with every motive and every resource provided to them.

## Conclusion

Intellectually speaking, Israel possessed a North Star. They knew in which direction they should orient themselves ontologically. They possessed a Global Positioning System by means of the covenant, providing a path to their destination. They also possessed a gyroscope to maintain equilibrium amidst turbulence and uncertainty. The fear of the Lord balanced their minds amidst disorienting messages from the other nations. Most importantly, they perceived the intrinsic value of the epistemological map provided to guide them on their spiritual pilgrimage—Scripture.

Intellectuality in ancient Israel precluded many of the epistemological maladies of modern Christianity: sloth and shallowness, anti-intellectualism and ignorance, syncretism and neutrality. Godly fear engendered wisdom and discernment, as well as worldview awareness and self-knowledge. In fact, mental piety appears in heartfelt prayers for intellectual self-awareness and they presume habitual repentance. David implored the Lord, 'Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and my mind' (Ps 26:2). Psalm 139:23 states, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!' Psalm 19:14 declares, 'Let the words of my mouth and the meditation

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21 See S. Dean McBride, 'The Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4–5', *Interpretation* 27 (1973): 303–4; Daniel I. Block, 'How Many Is God: An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4–5', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 2 (2004): 202–3.

of my heart be acceptable in your sight.’ Perhaps the most poignant expression of intellectual piety is Psalm 131:1–2:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.

Finally, Deuteronomy teaches that we will not honor God with our minds or reflect his glory if we lack knowledge and discernment. John M. Frame explains 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.’<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Deuteronomy—and 5:29 in particular—show that we are designed for thinking and that God desires a particular mindset for his servants—‘such a mind as this’.

For all these reasons, we must bring our brains to God. We should learn from our ancient brethren. Clearly, a Christian mind is a terrible thing to waste.

### Pragmatic postscript

How should we respond to Deuteronomy’s message? How can we learn to love God with our mind today? I suggest two preliminary steps.<sup>23</sup>

*Repentance:* Aspiring thinkers must turn back to the Bible as an act of worship. They should evaluate whom they listen to and where they learn. They must turn away from negative speakers and false messages. They should discern our intellectual context (Eph 2:1–3). They must distinguish between the trivial and the momentous. They must reinvest their intellectual capacity in the true, good and beautiful. They should develop intellectual virtues—such as curiosity, discipline, creativity and humility—in accord with the Scriptures.

This most difficult step entails growth of intellectual self-awareness. Carefully and honestly, assess how your family background, economic status, education (formal and informal), racial and ethnic status, and gender inform your worldview and deepest priorities. Evaluate where you obtain information. Calculate how much time you invest watching television or scanning Facebook and YouTube. Who and what determines how you think about yourself, your purpose, time, passions, spending, lifestyle and your responsibility to society? Ask yourself if you are truly a good steward of your mind.<sup>24</sup> If you are not, under the Spirit’s guidance and the teaching of Scripture, repent in the fear of the Lord. Turn from biblical ignorance and anti-intellectualism.

*Learning:* Apprentice thinkers acknowledge with their whole mind, soul and strength this essential truth: ‘Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by

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

23 The following material is adapted from *Such a Mind as This*, 393–94.

24 See Steve Wilkins and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord' (Deut 8:3). Together with fellow thinkers, build an educational infrastructure that fosters the fear of God as the foundation of knowledge.<sup>25</sup> Learn the history, people, themes and vision of the Bible. Study the cultures of the ancient Near East and Palestine. Practice intertextual reasoning and learn to think like the biblical authors.<sup>26</sup> Listen to the global Christian community and learn from the theological traditions of the church.

In all these ways, develop discernment and grow wisdom. Develop your intellectual curiosity about the topics that interest you and learn to think about them with the biblical worldview. Form Bible studies, reading groups and movie discussions. Bring your questions and doubts to the Word of God. Learn to interpret and engage popular culture with scriptural creativity.<sup>27</sup> Above all, personally and collectively, discern your true epistemic posture and listen to the counsel of Lady Wisdom: 'Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight. ... The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight' (Prov 9:6, 10).

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25 A helpful source is Celina Durgin, 'Are You Bible-Literate? How about Bible-Fluent? These Terms, Explained', <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461rls1>.

26 For reading recommendations on the Old Testament, see my *Such a Mind as This* website at <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461rls2>. Also, consult the list of learning resources at <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461rls3>, the Bible Literacy Coalition at <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461rls4>, and the Washington Institute at <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461rls5>.

27 See Ted Turnau, *Popogetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2012); Ted Turnau, E. Stephen Burnett and Jared Moore, *The Pop Culture Parent: Helping Kids Engage Their World for Christ* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2020); Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011).

# What Persecution To Endure, To Resist, or To Flee?

Dennis P. Petri and Ronald R. Boyd-MacMillan

*How to respond to persecution is a complex decision involving both principled and strategic considerations. In this article, two of the world's leading experts on religious persecution draw on both Scripture and their considerable experience to discuss the options comprehensively.*

Persecution is inevitable. But when should persecution be accepted, endured or even embraced, and when should we fight against it or flee from it?

The 'Under Caesar's Sword' project distinguishes three main types of responses: survival, so as to preserve the activities of the community; association, or trying to build resistance or resilience by cooperating with other churches and institutions; and confrontation, or seeking to openly challenge the persecuting agent.<sup>1</sup> When should we do each one? There is no easy answer to this question, but all persecuted Christians must face it.

When we turn to the Bible for help, we find two relevant imperatives that may appear to contradict each other. On one hand, we are to be meek and forgiving. Jesus taught his disciples to 'turn to them the other cheek also' and 'do not resist an evil person' (Mt 5:39). We need to be willing to suffer for Christ (Phil 1:29) and to persevere in the wake of persecution (1 Thess 2:13–16). On the other hand, the Bible also frequently calls on people to combat injustice and speak out for the vulnerable (e.g. Amos 5:24).

Are these imperatives really contradictory? We believe not. They can both be valid at the same time. Yes, Christians should turn the other cheek instead of angrily and aggressively overreacting to any insult. But this does not mean that Christians should passively undergo all the pressures and tribulations they face, doing nothing

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1 Daniel Philpott and Timothy Shah, 'Introduction', in Philpott and Shah (eds.), *Under Caesar's Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–29.

about them. We must indeed be willing to suffer for Christ, but this does not mean apathetically accepting all the persecution that comes to us. There is no contradiction between readiness to suffer for Christ and promoting justice by standing up to persecutors; we need to do both.

Still, persecuted Christians expect guidance on how to deal with their challenges. The more appropriate question, therefore, is not *when* but *how*. How should persecution be endured and how should the persecuted be dealt with?

The Bible does not provide a simple, pre-defined answer to these questions, but the Bible and the historical and contemporary stories of persecuted Christians offer relevant guidance that we can apply to our particular contexts. In fact, we should not be surprised that the Bible does not offer easy solutions, because each situation is unique and requires a different response.

Also, we believe that God wants us to wrestle with the persecution he sends into our lives. Persecution comes to us for a reason, and if we try to get rid of it too easily, we cannot learn from it. Jesus' recommendation, 'Seek and you will find' (Lk 11:9), is applicable here. Similarly, Paul wrote to the Philippians that his imprisonment 'really served to advance the gospel ... so that it has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard' (1:12). Paul had to endure time in prison so that the gospel could spread.

In this essay, we present several biblical considerations related to how we should respond to persecution. These considerations hint at principles and proper attitudes; they are not a standard contingency plan. Some of them may overlap or may seem to guide us in opposite directions. They need to be carefully weighed and contextualized. In some cases, we also incorporate options for those endeavouring to support the persecuted from afar.

### **Bibles, the main tool to endure persecution**

The Bible is the best support for believers undergoing persecution—if they have access to it. Some Christians can easily buy copies; others are denied this privilege. Supplying Bibles to the persecuted is, in our opinion, an essential task of the global church. Wherever possible, legal methods of importing and distributing Scripture should be used. But some governments deny the importation of Bibles or, in a more subtle approach, forbid imported Bibles in the nation's home language(s), therefore in effect permitting Bibles for expatriates but not for nationals.

Many Christian organizations arrange for the delivery of Bibles by irregular means. Some use the euphemism 'courier work' to describe people who, when visiting a country, carry a supply of Bibles hidden in a vehicle or their luggage. Most of these operate discreetly; a few act more openly. One classic example was Tom Hamblin, whose biography, *Under Their Very Eyes*, describes a selection of his exploits. One needs a clear calling from God, and the support of suppliers, to act as he did.<sup>2</sup> You could add in Brother Andrew's short book, *The Ethics of Smuggling*,

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<sup>2</sup> Deborah Meroff with Tom Hamblin, *Under Their Very Eyes: The Astonishing Life of Tom Hamblin, Bible Courier to Arab Nations* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2016).



which was a defence of sneaking Bibles into the USSR and Eastern Europe during the Cold War years.<sup>3</sup>

Modern technology has provided new opportunities for many, with downloadable Bibles in a vast number of languages. However, irrespective of this option, many still desire to have a physical copy despite the risk involved.

Furthermore, people desire most a copy in their heart language, not just the local trade language. Having such a Bible strengthens Christ's followers. Historically, the Christian communities that survived Islamic persecution were those that had the Bible in their heart language, not only the trade language of Arabic. This implies that Bible translation is an effective means of supporting persecuted Christians. Philip Jenkins reckons that it is vital to translate the Bible into a local language because persecution often results in that language being replaced, but if the church keeps it alive liturgically it has a better chance of survival. He cites the Copts of North Africa as an example.<sup>4</sup>

### Willingness to suffer for Christ

This is a non-negotiable principle. When we agree to follow Christ, we are invited to follow in his footsteps at any cost, even martyrdom. Jesus made this very clear to his disciples: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (Jn 15:20). His disciples repeated this truth on numerous occasions. Paul stated, 'In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim 3:12). Peter observed, 'Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ... But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you' (1 Pet 4:12–14). Church fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp and Justin Martyr repeatedly made the same points.

Enduring persecution is certainly not easy, but the examples of great Christians who have suffered for Christ should be a source of inspiration. Jesus obediently accepted crucifixion because he understood this to be God's command. Stephen, Paul, Peter and virtually everyone in the early church faced persecution (and sometimes martyrdom). They understood this to be part of the Christian life and most of them rejoiced in it (e.g. Acts 5:41).

### Actively engage persecution

But willingness to endure persecution does not mean that we should passively undergo it. Rather, actively addressing persecution is also a non-negotiable principle. These two concepts are not contradictory; rather, one can accept hostility while at the same time actively seeking the Lord's guidance on how to respond to it. There are many possible responses to persecution,<sup>5</sup> but we should not fold our arms

3 Brother Andrew, *The Ethics of Smuggling* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1974).

4 Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), 220–22.

5 Dennis P. Petri, 'Resilience to Persecution: A Practical and Methodological Investigation', *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 10, no. 1–2 (2017): 69–86, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461dpprbm1>.

and wait apathetically. Even if we believe the Lord is asking us to stay where we are and accept persecution, this should be the result of a conscious, prayerful decision.

Actively engaging persecution is a direct extension of the biblical call to social transformation. The restoration of the fallen creation and all its components starts with the resurrection of Christ. It follows that all Christians are called to work towards the transformation of all spheres of life until Christ's redemptive work is completed (Rom 12:2).

Thus, Christians should not neglect their calling to speak out against social injustice that is inherent to the gospel. This role is often ignored in large portions of Western Christianity that have tended to reduce the gospel to individual salvation and ignore its potential to transform the fallen creation, of which persecution is an outgrowth. If we want to be faithful Christians and truly be salt and light in the societies where we are placed, we should speak out on behalf of the dignity of victims of persecution and engage the corrupt social structures that are at the root of persecution.

The great evangelical statesman John Stott dedicated much of his output to Bible commentaries while serving as the vicar of All Souls at Langham Place in London. But he astonished evangelicals in 1984 by releasing a book entitled *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, which discussed such pressing social problems as human rights, the environment, inequality, racism and the nuclear threat. Many reacted with dismay, asking, 'Why is he not concentrating on the Bible, isn't that enough?' But as Stott wrote in his foreword, 'One of the most notable features of the worldwide evangelical movement during the last ten to fifteen years has been the recovery of our temporarily mislaid social conscience.' He admitted that a 'half century of neglect has put us far behind in this area.' As the world's second most influential evangelical statesman (after Billy Graham), he would ensure that the Lausanne Covenants of the 1980s would add social transformation to our mission as Christians, in conjunction with the verbal proclamation of the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

We must stress that engaging persecution should not entail the use of violence. We cannot go deeply into the complex issues of civil disobedience and self-defence here, but nowhere does the Bible approve retaliating against or killing our persecutors; it clearly leaves taking revenge to God (Rom 12:19–21).

Later we will provide some conceptual and practical suggestions on how to actively engage persecution. However, it is clear that we cannot remain passive in the face of persecution. Jesus said, 'The poor will always be with you' (Mk 14:7), but this does not mean we should not neglect our service to the poor. Jesus foretold that his followers would suffer for his name, but this does not mean we should overlook advocating for the persecuted. It's our Christian duty to respond proactively to injustice.

## **Harness the power of prayer**

The role of prayer may seem obvious, but it cannot be stressed enough. The power of prayer cannot be underestimated. It's the most effective instrument for social

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<sup>6</sup> See the Manila Manifesto, adopted at the conclusion of the second Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization in 1989: <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert461dpprrbm2>.

transformation that we have at our disposal. Although this concept is debated theologically, the Bible suggests that prayer can even provoke a change in God's heart, such as when Moses convinced God not to destroy the Hebrew people for their corruption (Ex 32:14). If prayer can change God's heart, it can also impact the course of our lives and the persecution we suffer.

The commitment to prayer of Christians under strain is often remarkable. We know of countless stories of persecuted Christians who persevered under persecution because of their depth of prayer, which gave them supernatural strength to go on in the darkest of times. Similarly, Luke 22:43 notes that an angel appeared to Jesus when he was praying about the immense suffering he was about to undergo 'and strengthened him'.

When we pray, we need to know what to pray for. The Bible explicitly asks us to pray for both the persecuted (Acts 12:5; Col 4:18; Heb 13:3) and the persecutors (Mt 5:44; Rom 12:14). Prayer is also a resource to discern God's will concerning persecutors and how we should respond to them.

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane can be taken as a template for how to pray about persecution: 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done' (Lk 22:42). Jesus submitted to God's will, asking for the persecution to be taken away from him, unless it was God's will for it to continue. This exact prayer has been used by generations of persecuted believers. It expresses submission to God's authority but also requests that the persecution be taken away.

The World Evangelical Alliance has highlighted the importance of prayer by initiating the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

When we pray for those enduring persecution elsewhere, we need to be careful about what we pray for. Are we indeed aligning with the agenda of those facing severe hostility? Here is an illustrative comment from Christians in Egypt who have suffered detention and torture:

Please don't pray *for* us. Please pray *with* us. If you pray *for* us, you will pray for the wrong things. You will pray for safety. You will pray that persecution will cease. But if you pray *with* us, you will ask God to bring millions of Egyptians to faith in Christ. You will pray that when the inevitable backlash comes because of our witness, we will be faithful, even if it costs us our lives.<sup>7</sup>

Aligning our prayers with the agenda of the persecuted is far from easy. For example, how should we pray for those unjustly imprisoned for their faith? In many cases, they are detained without trial. During the 2000s, a sub-Saharan Christian was imprisoned in a north African country. Other expatriate Christians were able to visit him occasionally. They learned that he had become the informal pastor in his section of the jail. Should they pray for his release or for his equipping as a pastor? Our personal practice is that when such people are married, we pray for their immediate release and return to their family, especially if they have young children. In contrast, if the imprisoned believers are single, as was this African man, then our prayer has been simply for God's will to be done in terms of when they are released. In addition,

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<sup>7</sup> Brother Andrew and Al Jensen, *Prayer: The Real Battle* (Witney, UK: Open Doors, 2010), chapter 7 (emphasis in original).

we always pray that they may remain faithful to God, have a clear sense of his presence, and be clear in their witness and testimony.

Furthermore, we must keep praying for such people after their release, because many face serious challenges due to changed circumstances. Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, two Iranians who were detained for nine months in Tehran, explain in their book *Captive in Iran* that after their release, their previous Christian friends were reluctant to associate with them due to the constant surveillance to which they were subject.<sup>8</sup> Sister Dianne Ortiz described how her recovery from being kidnapped and tortured while working in Guatemala took many years.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, genuine prayer should lead to action. If we pray earnestly for the persecuted, we will be moved to reach out and serve this suffering part of the body of Christ. If prayer is only about passively waiting for supernatural intervention, what is the point of praying? As James reminds us, ‘Faith without deeds is dead’ (2:26). Prayer should trigger us to act, as Aristarchus, Mark and Justus did when they visited Paul in prison (Col 4:10–11). What sort of actions might we be prompted to become involved with?<sup>10</sup>

### Wait for God’s time

The apparent contradiction presented at the start of this essay can be observed in Jesus’ own life. Sometimes he fled from his persecutors, but in the days leading to his crucifixion, he obediently submitted to arrest and even rebuked Peter for violently confronting the people who were about to hurt him. The key difference, of course, is that it was God’s time, and Jesus accepted the persecution only after intense consultation with God through prayer.

Jesus underwent crucifixion only after he became convinced ‘that the time was right’ (Jn 17:4). On previous occasions when his life was threatened, he avoided martyrdom, ‘because his hour had not yet come’ (Jn 7:30). In Philippians 1:20–26, Paul did not accept martyrdom because his mission to the Philippian church had not yet been completed. Years later, he realized that his ministry was complete—‘I have finished the race’ (2 Tim 4:7)—and could accept martyrdom. The life stories of both Jesus and Paul indicate that our response to persecution should include praying about it and waiting for God’s time. There are God-mandated times to avoid or resist some forms of persecution and times to accept it.

### When to flee

Whether Christians should stay where they are or flee when persecution erupts is among the most important questions many Christians struggle with. It’s rarely if ever simple. Fleeing might mean abandoning your church and your calling. Staying

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8 Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, *Captive in Iran* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013), 282.

9 Sister Dianna Ortiz, *The Blindfold’s Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

10 See also ‘The Role of Prayer/Intercession’, in Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Faith That Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2006), 255–60.

might put you and your family at great risk of being killed. Feelings of guilt may haunt you either way.

Every situation is different and will inevitably require prayerful examination of God's direction for your life. If possible, this should take place alongside close supporters, since there should always be a corporate element in a Christian's consideration of major decisions.

Fleeing persecution has a biblical mandate. Jesus instructed his disciples, 'When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes' (Mt 10:23).

Many biblical characters followed this mandate. God instructed Elijah to hide from King Ahab (1 Kgs 19:1–18). God told Joseph to flee to Egypt with Jesus to avoid Herod's persecution (Mt 2:13–18). On numerous occasions, Jesus went into hiding (Mt 4:12; 12:14–15; Jn 7:1; 8:59). Paul fled Damascus in a basket (Acts 9:23–25) and later went to Tarsus (Acts 9:29–30). He frequently left a city when persecution erupted, usually after consulting or meeting with local Christians (e.g. Acts 17:10–14).

An interesting thread in most biblical stories of flight or hiding is that they served a ministerial purpose. The flights were not to run away from suffering, but to fulfil a mission. God wanted Jesus and Paul to flee persecution when they were still conducting their ministry, because he needed them to be alive to accomplish his purpose. In Acts 8, when persecution hit the church in Jerusalem, all believers except the apostles fled to neighbouring provinces, an event the Lord used to take the gospel to unreached territories (Acts 8:4). Although these believers fled persecution, they did not compromise their faith or cease to preach the gospel.

Therefore, fleeing persecution can be the preferred response when it enables ministry. You are not a coward when you flee; you may be aiding the spread of the gospel. Your goal is not to become a hero. In one of his sermons, Charles Spurgeon cited Matthew 10:23 and concluded, 'A Christian man is not bound to endure persecution if he can help it.'<sup>11</sup>

However, in some situations, the Lord told people not to flee. We may feel a calling to stay because leaving our church behind would greatly weaken it and our presence continues to be required, as with the apostles in Acts 8:1.

Avoiding persecution is not the same thing as denying one's faith or watering down one's message to prevent suffering. It is sometimes necessary to retreat temporarily so as to survive and retain some level of influence for the gospel.

Many practical considerations are involved in a decision to flee. Jonathan Andrews provides details in *Last Resort: Migration and the Middle East*. Similar principles will apply elsewhere. Here is a brief summary.<sup>12</sup>

First, how long does one expect to be away for? Can one simply leave for a short period while the situation calms down? Andrews cites one case of an Egyptian

11 C. H. Spurgeon, 'Among Lions' (sermon, 4 September 1879), 7, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert461dpprbm3>.

12 Jonathan Andrews, *Last Resort: Migration and the Middle East* (Malton: Gilead Books, 2017). See also Stephen Carter, 'Staying for Good: 113 Middle Eastern Christians and the Challenge to Remain', in Sam George and Miriam Adenay (eds.), *Refugee Diasporas: Missions Amid the Greatest Humanitarian Crisis of Our Times* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Publishing, 2018).

Muslim-background believer who moved to another suburb of Cairo after being beaten up near his home and was welcomed back to his neighbourhood with a few months.

Second, where will you flee to? Is there a viable local option or must one travel farther?

Third, what will you do with your time in the new location? Can those who flee support themselves, or will they become dependent on the support of others? If they become dependent, for how long can that be sustained?

Fourth, if one is crossing a national border, what is the visa situation? Will international travel be problematic? Is it safe to travel via an airport, seaport or land crossing? Some people have become enmeshed in serious persecution because they tried to leave their country.

The title of Andrews' book reflects his view that fleeing one's country should be the last resort for those facing severe persecution. It is difficult, legally and culturally, and has long-term consequences. Yet where staying is likely to lead to loss of life, liberty or custody of children, flight may be the only option. Moreover, not everyone who migrates becomes effectively settled in their new country.

We recommend the Religious Liberty Partnership's helpful 2017 policy statement on flight as a response to persecution, available at its website.<sup>13</sup>

### **Some forms of persecution can be avoided**

In some cases, persecution can be avoided by fleeing, hiding or adapting our behaviour. Jesus accepted his arrest in Gethsemane, even rebuking Peter for his attempt to provide a diversion so he could escape (Jn 18:10–11), but earlier, Jesus paused his public ministry when his arrest was ordered (Jn 11:53–54). Whether to avoid persecution depends on God's specific direction, but there is no point in looking for persecution or actively provoking it through outright disrespectful behaviour. Many forms of persecution can and should be avoided by wise and culturally appropriate behaviour. Some persecution might be alleviated over time by positive engagement and dialogue. Persecution or martyrdom should not be a goal in itself.

There have been several incidents in the Gulf States of inappropriate outreach activities by teams making short visits. In one case, a team from India was arrested and swiftly deported after attempting to openly distribute tracts. On arriving home, they reportedly boasted about being persecuted. Nonsense. They had simply been totally disrespectful of their context. Such activities are invariably condemned by long-term expatriate Christians who know well how to be effective witnesses without alienating anyone.

There is nothing wrong with pragmatically adapting to circumstances to prevent hostilities, so long as this does not compromise one's Christian witness. Based on extensive field research on Christians' responses to persecution, the Under Caesar's Sword project offers these recommendations:

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<sup>13</sup> Religious Liberty Partnership, 'Relocation as a Response to Persecution: RLP Policy and Commitment', April 2017, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert461dpprrbm4>.

Persecuted churches should avoid giving unnecessary offense and bringing on 'avoidable' persecution by adopting (where possible) culturally sensitive measures to avoid community tensions. For example, churches can monitor sound levels during worship, avoid staging events on other religions' festival days, rely as much as possible on indigenous leadership, and avoid disrespectful public comments about other religions.<sup>14</sup>

Going around telling non-Christians that they are pagans and will burn in hell is rarely a successful evangelistic strategy and will give them a good reason to get angry at you. You will suffer persecution, not for Christ's sake, but because you were rude. This is not courage, it's simply stupidity. Generally, seeking confrontation is not a good way to witness to Christ. An attitude of patience and love often has a more lasting impact than the judgemental and proud attitude Christians sometimes display.

The Under Caesar's Sword project further recommends, 'Christians should consider keeping local festivals, dress codes, customs, and cultural symbols where these do not conflict with their faith. Local styles of worship can also be retained so long as they are supportive of, and do not undermine, Christian beliefs and teachings.' Again, adapting to cultural norms can avoid unnecessary persecution without compromising Christian witness.

Paul Estabrooks and James Cunningham offer additional practical suggestions on how the church can function under persecution so as not to invite trouble:<sup>15</sup>

- Integrate into the village without alienating the community.
- Be culturally sensitive to your community in matters of conduct—especially the youth.
- Do not use relief or social programmes as 'bait' for evangelism but rather for relationship and opportunity.
- Adopt a simple lifestyle consistent with that of the local people in the community.
- Encourage unity among Christian leaders in the area.
- Gather in smaller congregations if hostility persists.
- Avoid putting outsiders in a prominent role in the community.
- Always avoid disrespectful comments about other religions.
- Communicate with religious leaders before persecution takes hold.

If you unnecessarily provoke non-Christians around you, you may forever lose the opportunity to be salt and light in your community. At times, adapting may even be the only alternative to flight.

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14 Philpott and Shah, *Under Caesar's Sword*, 48. Spurgeon 'Among Lions', 6, makes a similar point: 'If you dwell among lions, *do not irritate them*' (emphasis in original).

15 Paul Estabrooks and James Cunningham, *Standing Strong Through the Storm* (Santa Ana, CA: Open Doors, 2004), 197.

## **Stand up for your principles, no matter the consequences**

Although it is generally wise to avoid outright confrontation and provocation, Christians should never renounce their principles, regardless of the consequences. The prophet Daniel is a good example. On two occasions, he remained true to his principles under severe testing. First, when young, he refused to eat food that had been sacrificed to the gods, thereby remaining true to the dietary injunctions that he believed he should follow (Dan 1). Much later (probably around age 70 or 80, based on the rulers named), he refused to halt his daily prayers to God and was thrown into the lion's den (Dan 6). Each time, God honoured him for his obedience.

Daniel's friends were also tested. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, fully aware of the consequences. They were miraculously preserved (Dan 3:8–30).

This consideration is, in a way, a counterpart to the previous one. Some issues are simply not worth suffering for, such as ludicrous cultural customs or unnecessary acts of provocation. But when it comes to bowing before idols or renouncing prayer, we are called to stay faithful to our biblical principles no matter what the consequences may be.

Paul was willing to endure the consequences of faithfulness, even death (Phil 1:20–26; 2:17). Despite knowing the risks, Paul believed he needed to go to Jerusalem and obeyed what he understood to be God's will (Acts 21:10–14). Jesus also set an example of fulfilling the will of God even at the cost of life itself.

## **There is a place for legal and political action**

Some persecution can and should be opposed through legal and political action, whether this means pressing charges, litigation, advocacy, campaigning or the use of any other instrument. However, legal action is appropriate only if a demonstrable crime or human rights violation has been committed.

We must distinguish clearly between our theological and our legal-political understandings of persecution. In some communities, social exclusion may qualify as a form of persecution, but it is not a punishable crime or a human rights violation and thereby does not justify legal action. Political action should be taken against policies and legislation that are demonstrably unjust. To fight forms of persecution that do not constitute criminal activity or human rights violations, other tactics should be considered.

Moreover, legal and political action works only if there is at least some degree of respect for the rule of law, either by state institutions or by the international legal system. Media publicity or international pressure may influence authoritarian governments, but such systems tend to lack the political will or state capacity to enforce respect for human rights, making legal or political advocacy relatively ineffective.

The Bible contains numerous stories in which persecution is resisted through the ancient equivalent of legal and political resources. The overall message expressed by these stories is that we should not be afraid of political engagement. If done for God's glory, political engagement can be a great vehicle for social transformation and a witness to God's power.



At one point in Jesus' trial, he broke his silence to testify to his innocence (Jn 18:23). Paul famously exercised his legal privileges as a Roman citizen on at least three occasions: in Acts 16:36–39 to request an apology from the judges for being jailed without trial; in Acts 22:24–29 to avoid being flogged; and in Acts 25:10–11 to escape from angry, murderous religious leaders by appealing to Caesar.

Paul's extensive knowledge of his legal rights is an example to all of us. Indeed, an essential dimension of our resilience to persecution involves knowing and claiming our rights, as well as how to file charges, deal with the police, document harassment and build trust. Legal knowledge and a profound understanding of the institutional processes of the justice system can greatly help us avoid or mitigate persecution.

Interestingly, Paul did not always choose to exercise his legal right as a Roman citizen. When Paul and Silas were arrested in Philippi (Acts 16:19), they did not declare their citizenship at first, although this could have prevented flogging and imprisonment. We are not told why they remained quiet on this occasion (one suggestion is that it was to protect their companions Timothy and Luke, who did not have Roman citizenship). From this information, we can deduce an important hint regarding the use of political and legal action: depending on the circumstances, it may be appropriate at some times and not at other times.

Also, invariably in the Bible, legal and political action is used to serve a ministerial purpose. For example, Paul's request to be taken to Caesar enabled him to continue his ministry of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles and ultimately to reach believers in the emperor's household. When Paul chose to mention his Roman citizenship in Acts 16, doing so was instrumental in affirming his witness to the jailer and his family. Legal and political action should serve a higher purpose than solely a motivation to preserve personal safety. It is not justified when it contradicts the gospel. Political engagement must be for God's glory, and it must benefit the persecuted.

Speaking out against injustice is a valid ministerial purpose and very much a biblical mandate (e.g. Prov 31:9; Is 1:17; Jer 22:3; Mic 6:8). The Bible contains many examples of leaders who decried injustice, often at great risk to themselves. In perhaps the most dramatic instance, Esther, assisted by her uncle Mordecai, advocated for the rights of her people and prevented a genocide. To do so, she had to overcome her fear and approach the king without being summoned, potentially a capital offence. The prophet Nathan rebuked King David for his adultery with Bathsheba and arranging to have her husband killed on the battlefield, even though he knew full well that giving this message from God could have resulted in his own death. John the Baptist told Herod a very inconvenient truth about him taking his brother's wife, for which John was jailed and subsequently beheaded.

These are biblical characters whose examples of obedience to God and commitment to justice we are invited to follow. They remind us that speaking out against persecution (and injustice in general) can be risky, both for the advocates and for the people they advocate for. If not done with great care and strategy, it can backfire, causing more harm than good. This leads us to another very important consideration: What is the likely impact of my effort? What unintended outcomes are possible? Will our efforts help the persecuted or make things worse for them?

Two brief stories, both from Arab-majority countries, illustrate the risks. During the 2000s, an indigenous disciple of Christ was arrested. The expatriate couple discipling him contacted a Western Christian group to discuss advocacy seeking his release. ‘Gladly’, the organization replied, ‘and we would expect it to be effective in this case. However, there is likely to be a backlash, possibly the non-renewal of your residency.’ The couple decided to proceed anyhow. Their friend was duly released shortly after a Western government that provided aid to the country contacted the government about the detained believer. Several months later, the couple’s annual residency renewal was refused. One cannot prove a causal link, but it seems likely that the authorities realized who had informed a Western government about the arrest.

The second example comes from Egypt. Terrence (Terry) Ascott acknowledges in his autobiography that he was deported from Egypt in April 1989 when the authorities discovered that he had been supplying details about a persecuted Egyptian to a well-known human rights organization. In this case, the organization committed a serious breach of protocol which allowed him to be identified.<sup>16</sup>

In these examples, the costs were borne by the expatriate Christians informing Western organizations with the express intent of applying pressure on the offending governments.

### Appealing to public opinion

Finally, we consider the value of using the media. The benefits of appealing to public opinion to prevent persecution are evident in a number of New Testament stories. On several occasions, people did not arrest Jesus because of their concern about the possible effect on the crowds (Mt 21:46). King Herod did not kill John the Baptist at first because ‘he was afraid of the people’ (Mt 14:5). Thus, there is biblical precedent for the strategic use of public opinion in advocacy.

In modern practice, publicizing a story requires engaging with mainstream media. This is a specialized skill that requires understanding of how the media operate, proper terminology, what is likely to get attention, and professional journalistic ability.

Second, a subtle variation on appealing to public opinion is the tactical use of threatening publicity within discreet advocacy. One could imagine privately telling a persecutor, ‘At present, very few people are aware of this injustice that you are perpetrating, and it will remain like this if you choose to act justly.’ This amounts to threatening to embarrass or shame the persecutor before an audience whose opinion they care about.

Third, the use of media for discipleship and teaching can support and strengthen the persecuted. One approach is broadcast media such as radio and television. Radio messages can be transmitted over long distances. In more recent years, targeted use of FM frequencies has allowed programming in specific dialects. Similarly, television can be terrestrial or via satellite, with the latter allowing broadcasts to large audiences that circumvent terrestrial censorship. In some parts of the world, international television is more trusted by audiences because local media sources are heavily

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16 Terrence Ascott, *Dare to Believe* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021), 5, 12.

censored by the authorities. Terry Ascott, in *Dare to Believe*, describes the professionalism required for such work and its potential effects. He endorses its value in letting indigenous Christians express their faith to their communities.

Fourth, online broadcasting is an exciting new development that allows broadcast media to operate globally, making content available to diaspora communities as well as the original in-country audience. Chat rooms and social media offer excellent ways for Christians worldwide to support the severely persecuted. To be effective, such efforts should be undertaken by people who are very close in language and culture to the target audience.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, there are many ways of support to support our brothers and sisters undergoing persecution. But if we are going to be effective activists challenging injustice, we should carefully consider what commitments, knowledge and persistence will be required of us.

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Andrews (ed.), *The Missiology behind the Story: Voice from the Arab World* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019), 111–12.

# On the Idea of Contextualization: Cultural Sensitivity *and* Catholic Sensibility

Francis Jr. S. Samdao

*How do we present the Christian faith so as to be sensitive and accommodating to local cultures while not obscuring the non-negotiable truths of the gospel? This article, authored in an Asian context but with worldwide relevance, offers guidance on fulfilling both of those imperatives.*

## Introduction

Christians need both to reflect deeply on their culture in which they are placed and to bring the wisdom of Christian tradition into their culture.<sup>1</sup> Clive Chin aptly captures the nature of this challenge anywhere in the world when he writes, “The task of Asian evangelical theologians is to contextualize biblical teaching so that our theology addresses the questions and concerns raised by particular sociocultural contexts here in Asia.”<sup>2</sup>

If we do not contextualize the gospel at all, we cannot apply it to various cultural situations effectively. This problem is particularly acute where people receive Christianity in a Westernized formulation. However, if we contextualize the gospel too much, in the sense that culture becomes the point of reference in doing theology, then it stops being the gospel.<sup>3</sup> I believe both problems are present in Asia today.

In this essay, I argue for the importance of cultural sensitivity and catholic (not Roman Catholic, but catholic in the sense of the Christian beliefs expressed in the church’s historic creeds) sensibility in contextualization in Asia. I use the term

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1 Tradition in this paper signifies the covenant of God between his people, as captured by the canon of the Scripture and espoused in the catholic heritage distilled in the assemblage of creeds, confessions and catholic wisdom. See James K. A. Smith, ‘A Philosophical Exploration’, in *Evolution and the Fall*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 50–51.

2 Clive S. Chin, ‘The Calling of Asian Christian Scholars: A Theologian’s Perspective’, *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 22, nos. 1–2 (March–September 2018): 31.

3 Uncritical accommodation to the practices and values of a culture results in syncretism. See Timoteo Gener, ‘Evangelicals and Catholics Together? Issues and Prospects for Dialogue and Common Witness in Lowland Philippines’, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 3 (2009), 232, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461fss1>.

‘culture’ to refer to ‘how we think about things, how we feel about things and how we talk about things. ... Culture includes customs, theories, ideas, practices, habits, role models, slogans, proverbs and much more. It is all that we pass on from one generation to the next.’<sup>4</sup> I do not wish to imply that there are only two cultures—Western and others—as culture is not monolithic in the West or in Asia.<sup>5</sup>

I will first present the complaints of some Asian theologians regarding the Westernized theology they inherited, leading to their attempt to focus on tribal or indigenous theologies. Second, I argue for the necessity of theological retrieval of Christian tradition by appreciating what has been passed down unto us and by retrieving catholic wisdom, which predates Western theology as we know it today. Lastly, I seek to explain the importance of balancing cultural sensitivity and catholic sensibility. I contend that Asians, as they deal theologically with issues in local contexts, should do so not in the name of rebellion against the West, but rather in the spirit of ‘Christian catholicity’. In short, we must be catholic (both ecumenical and historic) and contextual.

### Setting the stage: Asian theologians’ complaint

Reactionary measures against the Greek way of thinking or Western hegemony over theology seem to have propelled the contextual theology movement in Asia.<sup>6</sup> Asian thinkers assert that Western theologians are not the only voices in theology. Four decades ago, Protestant theology in the Philippines consisted mainly of the worldview that American missionaries had brought with them. Hence, there was no distinct and homegrown theological movement or tradition in the country.<sup>7</sup> Such a concern persists today. Filipino theologian José de Mesa confirms the scarcity of theological activity in the country. For him, the main reason is that Filipino theologians are just beginning to reflect and do Filipino theology seriously.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, Eleazar Fernandez of Union Theological Seminary in the Philippines speaks of cultural insensitivity that penetrates Philippine Christianity in the shape of colonizing theologies. In reaction to this problem, he stresses the importance of contextualization because Christian theology by its nature is contextual, exemplified in the incarnation of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Filipinos must understand and appreciate

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4 Thomas K. Johnson, ‘Christ and Culture’, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 35, no. 1 (2011): 6, <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert461fss2>.

5 Chin, ‘The Calling of Asian Christian Scholars’, 40.

6 See Melba Maggay, ed., *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization Issues through Asian Eyes* (Manila: OMF Literature, 2013); Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995); Jung Young Lee, *The Trinity in Asian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996); José M. de Mesa, *José M. de Mesa: A Theological Reader* (Manila: De La Salle University Publishing House, 2016).

7 Emerito P. Nacpil, ‘A Gospel for the New Filipino’, in *Asian Voices in Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 117.

8 José de Mesa, ‘Kapag ang “Ganda” ang Pag-uusapan: Mungkahi para sa Dulog at Paraan ng Mabathalang Pag-aaral’ (When ‘Beauty Is the Topic of Discussion: Suggestions for Resources and Ways to Study God), in *Ang Maganda sa Teolohiya* (The Beauty of Theology) (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundations, 2017), 1–2.

9 Eleazar S. Fernandez, foreword to *Christologies, Cultures, and Religions: Portraits of Christ in the Philippines* (Manila: OMF Literature, 2016), vii–ix.

their local cultures in their own eyes—defining Filipino cultures apart from the colonial baggage brought by colonization.<sup>10</sup>

Similar concerns have been expressed in other Asian countries. In *The Theology of Change*, Jung Young Lee claims that most of the theological writings of Asian Christians are just parroting traditional Western Christianity. Hence, he endeavours to interpret the Christian faith, specifically the customary ideas of God, from an Eastern framework. He believes that Asians should consider the importance of the cosmological perspective that influences Korea, China and Japan—the *I Ching*, also called the Book of Changes. The nature of the *I Ching* is summed up in the relationship between *yin* and *yang*. This concept is the primordial ethos of many East Asians; as Western philosophies are sometimes considered footnotes to the great Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the *I Ching* is the quintessential model for all Eastern philosophies.<sup>11</sup> Although Lee would endorse my assertion of the importance of cultural sensitivity, he goes to an extreme by making culture the dominant component in his contextualization. As such, his *Theology of Change* results in tribal or parochial theology.

Another Asian thinker who seems to put culture or experience on a pedestal is C. S. Song, who maintains that theology must be rooted in the experiences of the people, whether in human suffering or in happiness.<sup>12</sup> He conceptualizes a theological project for Asians using a ‘third-eye’ hermeneutic that would cater to diverse Asian settings. His starting point in doing theology is the experiences of Asian people. He assumes that traditional Western Christianity is largely irrelevant to Asia because it overlooks pressing issues for Asians such as poverty, political injustice and social inequality.<sup>13</sup>

Some Asian theologians have observed that the issues of tribal people from different parts of the world are neglected in theology. As such, they aim to present indigenous theology by drawing on distinct identities of the people and by discussing some particular concerns including ethnic conflict, injustice and subjugation.<sup>14</sup> For example, Akala Imchen of Clark Theological College in Nagaland, India, defines Christian tribal theology as ‘a theological articulation by native Christians, irrespective of lay, clergy, or theologian. They take their Christian faith commitment and traditions, as well as local traditional heritage and the contemporary socio-political, religio-cultural sources seriously for theological reflection interfacing contextual realities and challenges in everyday life.’<sup>15</sup>

Imchen provides a historical context in northeast India (NEI), where he cites the complaints of local theologians that most of the available theologies come from the

10 De Mesa, *José M. de Mesa*, 57.

11 Jung Young Lee, *The Theology of Change: A Christian Concept of God in an Eastern Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 1–18.

12 C. S. Song, *Third Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 80.

13 See Song, *Third Eye Theology*.

14 Hrangthan Chhungi, M. M. Ekka and Wati Longchar, eds., *Doing Indigenous Theology in Asia: Towards New Frontiers* (Nagpur, India: Commission on Tribals and Adivasis, 2012).

15 Akala Imchen, ‘Development of Indigenous Theology in North East India: An Appraisal’, in *Doing Indigenous Theology in Asia: Towards New Frontiers*, ed. Hrangthan Chhungi, M. M. Ekka and Wati Longchar (Nagpur, India: Commission on Tribals and Adivasis, 2012), 1.

Western 'theological mills'. Therefore, there is a need to develop a local theology. One example proposed by Renthysoba Keitzar (1936–2000), a pioneer of tribal theology in NEI, is that instead of using the 'lamb of God' as a metaphor in explaining the atoning work of Christ, NEI may refer to the 'cock of God' since that is the common sacrificial animal in their culture.<sup>16</sup> In this case, Keitzar clearly affirms cultural sensitivity but seems to neglect that the lamb of God is not just a cultural matter; the image also depicts the humility or meekness of the Saviour.

However, there are also positive elements of culture that can serve as sources for theology.<sup>17</sup> De Mesa offers some unique contributions in this regard. He delineates three presuppositions in contextualization: (1) the importance of explaining the gospel in a manner that the Filipinos may understand and value, (2) the vitality of 'indigenous theological reflection', and (3) the need to do local theology. He claims that theology in the Asian context, particularly the Philippines, must be rooted in local resources; a listening heart, or the humility to learn from cultural wisdom, insights, values and customs, is crucial. Therefore, he elaborates on some significant Filipino concepts and juxtaposes these with Christian precepts, such as linking *kagandahang loob* (the beauty of will) and God's benevolence; *loob* (the most authentic relational self) and prayer (the interaction between man's authentic relational self with God); *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and marriage; and *ginhawa* (well-being) and salvation.<sup>18</sup> He tackles these cultural values or virtues because culture not only generates 'tensions' in constructing theology but also reminds theologians that they should remain aware of what culture does to the understanding of life and the human consciousness.<sup>19</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah presents similar examples, referencing the struggles of the Burakumin in Japan and their understanding of Jesus Christ as liberator, the difficulties faced by the Dalit people in the socio-economic and political arena and their relationship to Dalit theology.<sup>20</sup>

These theologians explicitly highlight the role of culture in doing theology. I appreciate their contribution since they promote the importance of cultural sensitivity. Without question, the gospel needs to be preached in such a way that the host culture may understand it. Such concerns are important in bringing theological reflection to the grassroots level. However, they often appear to focus on a specific culture to the extent of distancing themselves from the global and catholic nature of the church. Thus, these local theologies become forms of parochial theology that seem to serve only the locals.

16 Imchen, 'Development of Indigenous Theology', 3, 4.

17 José M. de Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Theological Re-rooting* (Quezon City, Philippines: Maryhill School of Theology, 1987), 178. As a Catholic theologian, de Mesa appropriates theological resources from Vatican II. He explains that only in Vatican II did the Roman Catholic Church embrace the possibility to be a genuine church for the world, which necessitates a positive outlook on other cultures and a move beyond the Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures. José M. de Mesa, 'Re-thinking the Faith with Indigenous Categories', *Inter-Religio* 13 (1988): 18.

18 See De Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture*.

19 De Mesa, 'Re-thinking the Faith', 19.

20 See R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Frontiers in Asia Christian Theology: Emerging Trends* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

## Cultural sensitivity: why contextualize?

A single culture cannot confine theology. As Thomas K. Johnson puts it, “The Word has a long history of contributing key ideas, practices and institutions, even to those cultures that do not acknowledge the Word.”<sup>21</sup> This implies that Christianity is not merely a Western religion.<sup>22</sup> Contextualization is necessary because the gospel was not born in a vacuum. Moreover, it is impossible to detach theology from its context.<sup>23</sup> Contextualization seeks to include culture and human experiences in a theological project. In today’s postmodern age, there is a need to revisit the church’s theology, especially where it seems to have been heavily influenced by modern thinking; for instance, many Asian thinkers believe they must go beyond the cognitive-propositional approach to theology.<sup>24</sup> In a way, contextualization assumes that Christian doctrines are not merely propositional, and it appropriates the Christian faith for and applies it to indigenous cultures. The intention is that the people in a particular culture may grasp the Christian faith and relate it to their situations.<sup>25</sup>

Theologians need to ‘communicate Christian teaching in understandable terms and must address the most pressing questions of a given context or culture. This is the kind of “contextualization” that evangelicals have long vocally supported, given their desire to see the whole world fully grasp the rich beauty of the gospel.’<sup>26</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer surmises that culture can teach Christians too because it orients, communicates, reproduces and cultivates.<sup>27</sup> This assertion is crucial because it acknowledges the need to remove the ascendancy of ethnocentrism and, at the same time, the hegemony of Western Christianity over the cultures of other Christians around the globe. But at the same time, Asians should also be careful not to create a theology isolated from global Christianity.

## Catholic sensibility: theological retrieval of Christian tradition

Theological retrieval of Christian tradition is also part of contextualization. Christians are a community that does not choose its own ‘language’ in navigating

21 Johnson, ‘Christ and Culture’, 16.

22 Tite Tiénou, ‘Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity’, in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 37.

23 See Timothy C. Tennent, ‘The Gospel in Historical Reception’, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 1 (2009): 77, <https://worldea.org/yourls/ert461fss3>.

24 Asians, however, are not the only ones arguing for a creativity in theology that is somewhat hindered by the modernist approach to theology. The quest for theological paradigms in engaging post-modernism has spawned many methods, such as the Emerging Church movement, post-liberal or narrative theology, and post-conservative theology, to name a few. See John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: A Postconservative Evangelical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

25 De Mesa, *José M. de Mesa*, 48.

26 Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue, introduction to *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2019), 3.

27 Kevin Vanhoozer, ‘What Is Everyday Theology? How and Why Christians Should Read Culture’, in *Everyday Theology*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer, Charles Anderson, and Michael J. Slesman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 28–31.



the world. Alister McGrath writes, ‘We would be greatly assisted in the task of rendering a faithful and effective account of the biblical material if we were to draw on the rich witness of those who have reflected on Scripture before us. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we have a tradition of nearly two thousand years of engagement with Scripture at our disposal.’<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Timoteo Gener of Asian Theological Seminary explains, ‘In presenting the contours of Asian evangelical theology, it is foundational to begin with the biblical teaching on revelation. Why so? Because the very identity of evangelical theology lies in giving witness to God’s self-revelation in Christ, relating and applying the Word to the world.’<sup>29</sup> De Mesa’s assertion that Christian doctrines need to help local people to embrace and elevate their cultural identity is admirable, and Song’s focus on human experience is worth noting. But they must also reckon with the fact that the church is a unique community with its own practices, liturgies and rites. In short, the church itself is a culture.<sup>30</sup> Given that truth, catholicity is vital in any contextualization.

### The church as culture

As its own culture, the church offers a unique alternative to the visions, purpose, rites, languages and character of the earthly city. It has its own sources, such as the Scriptures and church tradition. To elaborate on this point, I will draw on the works of Stanley Hauerwas. For him, the bride of Christ is a peculiar people formed by God in Christ. He states boldly, ‘The first task of the church is not to make the world more just but to make the world the world.’<sup>31</sup> Hauerwas’ point here is not against contextualization. I believe his argument about the first task of the church reminds Asians that in doing theology, it is crucial to understand the church as alternative community.<sup>32</sup>

Hauerwas’ description of the task of the people of God seems odd and thought-provoking. I find an incarnation of Barth in Hauerwas, particularly in the latter’s consistent articulation that the church presents a different political commitment and alternative in opposition to the political vision and games of the world. The root of that commitment lies in the logic that the church is composed of people who worship the triune God, and who commit their lives to be absorbed by the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As such, for Christians to confess that ‘Jesus is Lord’ entails an allegiance to the kingdom of God, not to this world. Accordingly, Hauerwas posits that Christians need to recover the integrity of the church as a

28 Alister E. McGrath, ‘Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition’, in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 140.

29 Timoteo D. Gener, ‘Divine Revelation and the Practice of Asian Theology’, in Gener and Pardue, *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, 13.

30 See James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, Cultural Liturgies vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), xii.

31 Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theological Memoir* (London: SCM Press, 2010), x.

32 The church’s presence as an alternative community reminds us that humans do not govern the earthly empire alone. God rules it primarily as Creator. The problem with this earthly city or ‘empire’ is that it has its own values, visions and liturgies because it does not recognize the God who is in Jesus Christ. Many thinkers have developed this concept from Augustine’s *City of God* with different nuances.

unique and alternative city.<sup>33</sup> The church is not the world, and the world is not the church. The community of God is an assemblage of forgiven people from different tribes and cultures. In their conversion, they are and continue to be immersed in the story of God—a new story that is quite different from the world’s narrative and propaganda.<sup>34</sup>

In short, the bride of Christ has its own centre of gravity. Nevertheless, it is not to withdraw from the tragic condition of the world and reduce theology to a mere intellectual aspect. As the people of God, we must come to terms with the daily lives of people around us. On the other hand, one of the crises of today’s church rests in its attempt to become the world! Hauerwas states, ‘My call for Christians to recover the integrity of the church as integral to our political witness does not entail that Christians must withdraw from the economic, cultural, legal, and political life of our societies. It does mean, however, that the form of our participation will vary given the nature of the societies in which we find ourselves.’<sup>35</sup> The citizens of this city are called to be people of witness—a people who minister to the world not by ruling or domination (the Constantinian spirit) but by learning to serve, suffer and cross the ethnic walls embedded within societies.<sup>36</sup> In serving as an alternative community, the church has a rich tradition of resources (including Scripture, creeds, confessions and church history, and others) that provides it with the means to understand the world.

### Towards a ‘catholic’ lens

Ecclesiology is very important but often neglected. Our doctrine of the church connects with all other parts of the Christian faith because it is the most visible aspect of Christian theology. Therefore, the nature of the church, its marks and its purposes must be of primary importance to Christian theology and Christian life as we do contextualization.

The church of Christ is both visible and invisible. On one hand, the invisible church is composed of those genuine believers whom only God can recognize. On the other hand, we cannot disregard the visible aspect of the church, or the body of Christ as Christians are recognized here on earth. The people of God are both local and universal,<sup>37</sup> an eschatological gathering that can be described as holy, catholic and apostolic.<sup>38</sup> This understanding of the nature of the church affects contextualization. Since the church is holy, Christians should do theology in a way that elevates not merely human culture but the holiness of God. Since the church is

33 Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 12.

34 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 151.

35 Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today*, 13–14.

36 Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Beyond the Boundaries: The Church Is Mission’, in *Walk Humbly with the Lord: Church and Mission Engaging Plurality*, ed. Viggo Mortensen and Andreas Østerlund Nielsen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 53.

37 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 856–58.

38 Daniel T. Slavich, ‘In Church as It Is in Heaven: An Argument for Regenerate and Ethnically Diverse Local Church Membership’, *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 45.

catholic, it needs the participation of all Christians—past and present, and from different parts of the world. Furthermore, since the church is apostolic, theologians should drink from the well of wisdom of those who have gone before them and whose experiences and ideas have strengthened the foundation of the church throughout the ages.<sup>39</sup>

The traditional use of theoretical reason (the ‘Big Fat Greek Method’) as the only canon in a theological endeavour is superficial. Although various philosophies are but footnotes to Plato, the history of theology is quite different. The role of reason has some function in theology, but it is not the sole rule.<sup>40</sup> Vanhoozer explains the importance of ‘turning to the context’, which is helpful for Asians. However, he also proposes a framework called ‘theodrama’ and delineates the importance of the ‘catholic principle’. For him, theology is not a composition of ideas but is instead *performative*, requiring the presence of all Christians.<sup>41</sup> More importantly, the primary performance that constitutes the church is that of the triune God.

The catholic principle is commonly disregarded in contextualization due to the focus on human experiences and cultural resources. As I argued above, in contextualization, catholicity is crucial. For instance, because of the creeds, Christians need not reinvent the trinitarian or Christological wheel.<sup>42</sup> Appreciating the universality of the church is not only about conversing with dead theologians and their seemingly archaic ideas. It also entails humility to connect with the history and catholicity of the unique people of God. Since the church is universal, it transcends the geographical differences of its citizens.

### The fusion of horizons

Although culture is crucial, Christian tradition is central. Theology, therefore, must retrieve the historical breadth and depth of Christian tradition.<sup>43</sup> Asian Christians need to reflect on the reality that they cannot extirpate Western elements mixed in their culture. Besides, the modern world is increasingly becoming one village. Hence, the two poles of contextualization and catholicity must be put together to discover a theological methodology that embraces both of them. Oliver Crisp notes,

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39 Oliver Crisp, *God, Creation, and Salvation: Studies in Reformed Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 39.

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

41 Vanhoozer, ‘One Rule to Rule’, 91–133. Vanhoozer elucidates that Scripture is not merely a deposit of propositions, but rather the Script in the theodrama. Furthermore, the doctrines serve as the theatrical directions, the people of God (the church) are participants, and theology is performance based on the Script. Therefore, Vanhoozer’s theodrama theory entails an imaginative approach, and not only an analytic or conceptual one. The purpose of theology in this theory is to guide God’s people or illumine their path as to what ‘stage’ they are at and how to be a living witness to the gospel in different situations. Theodrama seeks to produce wisdom (*sapientia*) or practical reason and lived knowledge (*phronesis*). That is one reason why Vanhoozer reacts against the Western hegemonic attitude and the imposition of culture as the decisive factor in theologizing. Vanhoozer, ‘One Rule to Rule’, 109–10.

42 See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ‘Letter to an Aspiring Theologian: How to Speak of God Truly’, *First Things*, August 2018, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert461fss4>.

43 David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 13.

“The conversations we have with thinkers of the past are never of merely historical interest. They are always a means of resourcing our current theological concerns with the arguments of the past. That is what theological retrieval is about: fructifying the work of today with the best of the past as a means of pursuing a constructive theological project.”<sup>44</sup> Cultural sensitivity and catholic sensibility affirm the contributions of both Asian and Western ideas. Thus, pitting Asian versus Western categories is not helpful, especially in a time when the world has become a global village.

Simon Chan, an Asian theologian, espouses the importance of community in doing theology. He makes a relevant point for Asian thinkers to reflect on:

Perhaps it is time to get rid of the habit of describing different patterns of thought in terms of Eastern and Western ways of thinking. In a postmodern, globalized world, such descriptions are neither helpful nor accurate. Rather a more pertinent question we need to ask in order to develop a contextual or local theology in an Asian context is: what spiritual and intellectual resources of the Christian faith can we bring to bear on the Asian context such that an authentic Christian faith can be effectively communicated and received?<sup>45</sup>

Chan’s pronouncement regarding the significance of community as not a mere local gathering but as encompassing the catholicity of the people of God is important. Theology in and for Asia does not simply involve focusing on Asian cultural resources but must also connect them to the larger body of Christ. Christians are not to become oblivious to the different cultural horizons amongst them, but as they live out the Christian faith in their local setting, they should also pursue connections to the larger body of Christ or world Christianity. In other words, doing theology in Asia needs to deal with the concerns of people in a specific culture as they are guided by Scripture and Christian tradition.

Contextual theologies should be created not for the sake of having our own Asian (or African or Latin American) theologies but also to impart something to the catholicity of Christianity as a whole. The Christian faith during the past century has experienced an enormous shift in its centre of gravity towards the Global South. Tite Tiénou argues for the importance of gathering wisdom from the untold story of Christianity in Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands as an addition to the rich resources of Christianity.<sup>46</sup> The work of theology is a communal effort because no single person or group can do theology in this globalized world.<sup>47</sup> Seen from this perspective, theology cannot be conceived in terms of creating tribal theologies devoid of catholic connectivity. Instead, locally based theological endeavours may nurture an ecumenical spirit among the diverse people of God across space. Christians from different cultures are one body, admonished to contextualize the faith in a changing world. The problem of divisiveness and individualism amongst

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44 Crisp, *God, Creation, and Salvation*, 40.

45 Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 10.

46 Tienou, ‘Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity’, in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 37–41.

47 Tienou, ‘Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity’, 39.

Christians today is not helpful. Hence, it is essential to bridge the outrageous separation of saints from one another. From this claim, it follows that evangelicals should strive to work with other saints in dealing with ecumenical issues.<sup>48</sup>

It is true that ‘While God transcends time, however, the doctrine of God does not.’<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, this statement does not give us the freedom to create a theology according to our individualistic tastes. Vanhoozer’s theodrama, which he also calls a canonical approach, pulls diverse theologies together to be conformed into an anthology, God’s story. That approach argues that the Holy Spirit speaks through Scripture and doctrines regarding the communication and action of God in the history of Israel and Christians from different parts of the world.<sup>50</sup> So, instead of focusing on one template in an age of globalization (e.g. a Western framework or stressing indigenous theologies), Christians should recognize that each believer has a part in this canonical drama, with God as the main actor. Theology is not the initiative of the community of God, but of God Himself. Hence, Christians are to live out their doctrine before the world as witnesses, affirming that ‘We speak well of God ... only because God has first spoken to us, given us his name.’<sup>51</sup>

Contextualization is a critical element in Christian theology to remind us that theology is not just a finished product or divine data to be mastered by human minds; rather, theology has to confront real-life problems and the spirit of the age. Contextualization in Asia requires mutual respect and dialogue between the Christian faith and the people’s experience. It is more than a translation into cultural language or cultural equivalence. Cultural wisdom should connect to the Christian faith, and the latter should converse with the former.<sup>52</sup> An attitude of critical openness is crucial in this attempt—openness to the universality of the church and the intellectual depth rooted in the Christian tradition, while being critical of the relationship between the Scripture and culture. That includes recognizing that culture may contradict Scripture at times.<sup>53</sup>

I appreciate de Mesa’s emphasis that contextualization ‘must mean not only the rootedness of Christian faith within the culture but also the promotion of cultural identity of people, for culture as a way of life cannot be excluded from the offer of wholeness from God which is salvation.’<sup>54</sup> In balancing cultural sensitivity and catholic sensibility, we would do well to listen to Barth’s assertion that God himself is the alpha and omega of theology.<sup>55</sup> The primary point of reference of theology is not human experience but God.

48 Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 11.

49 Kevin Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), xii.

50 Vanhoozer, ‘One Rule to Rule’, 109.

51 Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology*, xiii.

52 De Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture*, 4–9.

53 See Timoteo Gener, ‘Every Filipino Christian a Theologian’, in *Doing Theology in the Philippines* (Manila: OMF Literature, 2005), 7.

54 De Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture*, 22.

55 Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 16.

Two crucial lenses should guide the interaction between theology and the people's experience: a hermeneutic of appreciation and a hermeneutic of suspicion. The former assumes the importance of a culture's wisdom, customs, interpretations and beliefs; the latter recognizes that any culture contains many ambiguities concerning ideologies, beliefs and values. Having a lens to look askance at culture, therefore, is a necessity. What binds the two hermeneutics together is these two related stipulations: theology should increase the faith of God's community and should lead people to live in light of God's holiness.<sup>56</sup> Although cultural exegesis is a component of theologizing, suspicion towards culture is also necessary, for the simple reason that 'Culture is a lot of things, but not everything.'<sup>57</sup>

The hermeneutics of appreciation and suspicion must be intertwined in a dialectic manner. In our present case, contextualization needs not only sensitivity to the elements of cultures but also appreciation of the sources of Christian tradition—Scripture, history, doctrines and practices.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have contended for contextualization within the bounds of the catholicity of the church. The church is an alternative city composed of peculiar people whose allegiance is to Jesus Christ. As such, it has a rich tradition, which Asian theologians should fully take into account in their work of contextualization, balancing cultural sensitivity with catholic sensibility.

Contextualization is valid, even essential. Culture is not to be seen as evil. Culture is vital in doing theology, but it is ministerial. Culture does not overpower Scripture, and a concern for preserving or honouring one's culture does not justify formulating tribal theologies for the sake of uniqueness or in resistance to Western Christianity. Contextualization is valid because it engages the culture and lived experiences of the people, but this process must also appreciate the universality of the church. Ethnic cultures may have a role in a theological project, but indigenous theologies should be neither despised nor exaggerated.

Contextual theologies are gifts from the local church to the church universal. Asians and others should be careful about creating various independent ethnic theologies, because doing so may engender a 'clash of clans' in theologizing. Furthermore, this approach weakens the ability of contextual theology to engage post-modernity, globalization and world Christianity.

Although I grant the need to address local issues in the light of theology, let us not put aside the importance of an ecumenical spirit. Overreacting and rejecting Western influence by developing a tribal theology that does not acknowledge the richness that Christian tradition offers us is problematic and unnecessarily divisive.

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56 De Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture*, 12–17. Thomas K. Johnson helpfully articulates four modes of interaction between the church and culture in 'Christ and Culture', 4–16.

57 John Stonestreet and Brett Kunkle, *A Practical Guide to Culture: Helping the Next Generation Navigate Today's World* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2017), 4.

# Jesus' Discipleship Model of Suffering and Sacrifice: Discipleship and Racial Justice

Israel Oluwole Olofinjana

*How to pursue racial justice has been a contentious issue in many places, particularly because of the allegedly radical views of some pro-justice organizations. This article takes a different approach, depicting racial justice as an implication of whole-life discipleship and proposing practical actions for Christians.*

## What is discipleship?

Any meaningful discussion on discipleship must start with the understanding of the lordship of Christ. This is because it is within this context that we can talk about following Jesus in obedience, dedicating our lives to God's kingdom. The lordship of Jesus as the Messiah who came to us as a vulnerable human being to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth is the central theme of the New Testament. Jesus' idea of the kingdom of God was a radical message in that a worldly king and kingdom in his day were displayed through pomp and pageantry, but the kingdom Jesus introduced was defined by love, submission, humility and peace. This was because Jesus emptied himself, or more accurately did not cling or hold on to power (Phil 2:5–7). This is known as *kenosis* (Greek for emptying oneself), a theological concept that describes the humility and liminality of Jesus' life, ministry and mission. Therefore, Jesus taught that those who want to be great or lead must become a servant in order to lead effectively (see Mk 10:34–45). The implication is that for us to incarnate Jesus' mission, we must first empty ourselves or renounce any worldly notions of power or ambition.

We want to be followers of Jesus but only when it is convenient or when we are benefitting from the relationship. However, Jesus' imperative calling to his disciples was that 'if anyone will follow me, they must deny themselves and carry the cross' (paraphrasing Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23).

Denying ourselves in a consumeristic, materialistic and individualistic society involves a lot of suffering, and carrying the cross means we are ready to sacrifice to the point of death for the sake of God's kingdom. Jesus himself demonstrated this as a suffering servant who paid the ultimate price on the cross. What some nurses did during the pandemic in carrying out their vocation by sleeping in hotels away from

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their families and carers staying at care homes during the lockdown exemplifies this kind of sacrifice.

The implication of Jesus' suffering is that our discipleship programmes and events, if not preparing people to understand the idea of suffering and sacrifice, will mean they will only follow Jesus temporarily when all is going well. People will follow Jesus for a while and when things get really tough they will walk out on God. Another implication is that we follow Jesus as the only lifestyle and not as an optional lifestyle when it is convenient and comfortable. It is putting every part of us—mind, will and emotions and all aspects of our lives (job, family, education, hobbies, finances)—before God to use as he pleases and whenever he calls us.

After Jesus gave some serious teaching about what it means to believe and follow him, many of the Jews left him, but then he asked the disciples one important question: 'So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?"' (Jn 6:67). Peter's answer to that question is very important for our discipleship today because it demonstrates loyalty and obedience to the lordship of Christ. 'Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life"' (Jn 6:68). Peter's answer is conditioned on the understanding that following Jesus, even when it is rough and difficult, is not an optional lifestyle, but his very survival depends on it.

Jesus' notion of suffering and sacrifice as an essential element in following him has been demonstrated through the history of the church. Eusebius, the church historian, chronicles the sufferings and martyrdom of the early disciples and how the church expanded through persecution in its first three hundred years.<sup>1</sup> Many of the early disciples of Jesus suffered in different ways and ultimately sacrificed their lives in following God's call to incarnate his kingdom. An example is James, the Lord's brother, who was recorded as having been thrown down from the parapet and then afterwards beaten to death with a fuller's club.<sup>2</sup>

Martyrdom, that is, the idea of dying for the cause of Christ, was a major theme in early and patristic Christianity. It also became a vehicle for advancing God's kingdom so that Tertullian (c. AD 150–225), an African church father and theologian, could say, 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church' (Tertullian, *Apology*, book 50).<sup>3</sup> In essence, martyrdom and mission went hand in hand. Martyrdom is a heavy subject and looks at death from a different vantage point, but I am exploring it here to illustrate the attitude to suffering and sacrifices that the early followers of Jesus had to endure in order to do mission.

In summary, Jesus suffered and sacrificed himself on the cross and his followers through most of the history of Christianity have followed a similar pattern in doing mission. If Jesus' notion of discipleship involves suffering and sacrifice, then why is it that these are not emphasised in our modern whole-life discipleship programmes?

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1 Andrew Louth (ed.), *Eusebius: The History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1965).

2 Louth, *Eusebius*, 36.

3 John Foxe and M. Hobart Seymour, *The Acts and Monuments of the Church: Containing the History and Sufferings of the Martyrs*, part 1 (London: Charter House, 1838), 44.



## Critique of Western models of discipleship

Modern theology<sup>4</sup> and mission rooted in the Enlightenment traditions have for so long shaped our discipleship model. The result is a discipleship model that is dichotomized and influenced by the myth of progress. This pattern of discipleship compartmentalizes so that Christianity appears to be relevant on Sunday but not on Monday to Friday at work or in the marketplace. In addition, the consumer feature of modern/postmodern life has shaped our discipleship models with the idea of options, progress and greed.

It always amazes me when I hear sometimes what people are considering when looking for a church. Does that church have a worship band? What type of songs do they sing? Sometimes it feels as if people are in a shopping mall when looking for a church as they hop from one church to another searching for the right worship band or preacher. While the emerging church of the postmodern context, with the model of discipleship premised on whole life expressed through missional communities,<sup>5</sup> has challenged this previous model of discipleship shaped by consumerism, it has not however completely been deconstructed. This is where Michael Stroope's (an American mission theologian) penetrating analysis of the language of mission as problematic, because of its lack of use in the biblical text and its link to conquest and colonialism, is very useful.<sup>6</sup> While not abandoning the language of mission, Stroope's thesis is useful in the sense that it allows us to decolonize mission and discipleship.

For our Western models of discipleship to be decolonized, we need an outsider's perspective that is not shaped by an Enlightenment worldview. This is because one cannot see beyond one's own paradigm. This is where the insights of Majority World Christians are needed. For example, George Floyd's death has really exposed the fact that our Western models of discipleship are very weak on racial justice concerns and therefore people in our churches were not fully prepared to engage in such conversations until forced to do so by Floyd's sudden death. Modern theology, which forms the basis for Western models of discipleship and mission, is not strong on issues of racial justice because it has operated for the most part from colonial perspectives. The missionary movement of the 18th century that went from the West to the Majority World operated alongside colonial authorities and under the guise of empire.<sup>7</sup> That is why the concept of 'Christianity, commerce and civilization' was promoted as part of some missionary strategies. We need the voices of Majority

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4 Modern theology is the theological enterprise that developed within the European context of the Enlightenment period in the 18th century. It sought to engage the intellectual reasoning of that time.

5 Missional communities as defined by the Gospel and Culture network are communities called to represent the compassion, justice and peace of the reign of God. The distinctive characteristic of such is that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains them. See Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 142.

6 Michael Stroope, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (London: Apollos, an imprint of Inter-Varsity Press, 2017).

7 A recent discussion of the modern missionary movement and its impact on African cultures can be found in Harvey Kwiyani, 'Mission after George Floyd: On White Supremacy, Colonialism and World Christianity', *Journal of Theology and Mission* 36, no. 2 (2020), <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461ioo>.

World Christians and theologies on discipleship and mission to bring a post-colonial insight and critique from their experiences of colonial suffering.

Another reason why our Western model of discipleship is weak on racial justice concerns is a follow-up from the above point. Due to Western colonial perspectives, there is a false dichotomy that somehow separates or compartmentalizes our whole-life discipleship from racial justice concerns. How can we begin to address this gap in our whole-life discipleship?

### **Jubilee as a theological framework for whole-life discipleship and racial justice**

The concept of jubilee in the Old Testament (Lev 25) gives us a theological framework to help address the gap of racial justice in our whole-life discipleship. Jubilee is best understood against the backdrop of the children of Israel coming out of Egyptian enslavement, and the new community of Israel understanding its new identity in a covenant relationship with God. In this covenant relationship, God promises freedom for all humanity (Israel as an example) and creation in the 50th year. Jubilee provides us with three ideas: liberty (slaves and prisoners are free), economic justice (debts and loans at interest are cancelled) and ecological recovery (the land had rest). The Prophet Isaiah developed these ideas in a messianic figure when he envisioned a just society that provides holistic freedom (Is 61:1–2). Lastly, Jesus used the Isaiah text as the basis of his Nazareth manifesto to shape his Kingdom theology (Lk 4:18–19).

One strength of the Jubilee framework is that it connects to other theological ideas such as creation when it talks about the necessity for the land to rest and recover in the seventh year. It also foreshadows the messianic kingdom when the Messiah will establish God's kingdom on earth. This notion of God's kingdom has the tension of the present reality as expressed in Jesus' Nazareth manifesto, but it also hangs on consummation, when that future kingdom is realized in hope. The debt cancellation of Jubilee is also symbolic of God's forgiveness provided to humanity through the cross of Christ. This encapsulates God's love and forgiveness.

The Jubilee framework therefore furnishes us with such rich theological paradigms as creation, justice, God's kingdom, forgiveness, love and hope. Another strength of the Jubilee framework is that it hangs on a covenant relationship with God in the light of justice. In essence, it is about following and developing a relationship with God, but that covenant relationship is not complete until there is justice for the enslaved or those who are not economically free, or ecological recovery for the land.

The emphasis on justice as a key goal of whole-life discipleship is what contextual post-colonial theologies such as Black theology and African political theology are known for.<sup>8</sup> Black theology in the context of apartheid South Africa fought for racial

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8 Black theology was defined by James Cone, who is regarded as a pioneering father, as 'a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus in the light of the black condition. It believes that

justice for blacks and coloured people.<sup>9</sup> It fought for their political freedom, human identity and dignity, articulating that they are created in God's image. In the British context, Black British theologians such as Robert Beckford, Anthony Reddie, David Muir, Dulcie Dixon McKenzie, Pauline Muir and Eleasah Louise Phoenix to name a few have all been arguing, before the murder of George Floyd, for the need for the UK church to take the concerns of racial justice very seriously. For example, Robert Beckford's thesis known as the Dread Thesis offers us a Pentecostal political theology that speaks prophetically into social and political life in Britain.<sup>10</sup> One area where African political theology and Black theology offer us a critical tool to engage is the use of intercultural theology as a racial justice strategy that can help us develop a multi-ethnic church or organisation.

### Multi-ethnic Christianity and racial justice

I will now apply some learnings of World Christianity to church networks, mission organizations and theological colleges. These learnings are applying lessons of intercultural mission through multi-ethnic Christianity and racial justice.

First, for our churches, mission agencies and theological colleges to become places where God's multi-ethnic kingdom is expressed, we have to be intentional in our thinking, strategies and action. People often desire a multicultural or multi-ethnic church, college or organization but are not prepared to do the hard work that it requires. Has your board of directors or trustees intentionally sought to have on the team people of Asian, African or Latin American background? Does your five-year strategic plan intentionally include engaging Majority World Christians and churches? Does your national leadership team have only PLUs (People Like Us)? The early church was intentional in nominating and appointing Grecian Jews when they felt marginalized by the Hebraic Jews. A study of the names of the seven leaders (deacons) selected demonstrates this intentionality (see Acts 6:1–7).

Second, we need to create safe spaces in our church streams, mission agencies and theological colleges to have conversations about race and racism. Churches too many times shy away from having these conversations because it makes people feel uncomfortable. If we are going to move forward, we need to have these conversations, and the murder of George Floyd has certainly given us the framework to have these conversations. Can our church meetings or board meetings be dedicated to talking about the issue of race and racism? Do our theological colleges have compulsory modules on Black theology, African theology and post-colonial

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the liberation of the black community is God's liberation.' James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 20th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 4–5. Black theology also exists in the context of Southern Africa. We also now have Black British Theology in the UK. African political theology is a theology of liberation speaking into socio-economic and political issues on the continent of Africa. It seeks to address issues such as military coups, political dictatorships, oppression, exploitation, poverty, diseases and environmental issues. See John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1995).

9 Basil Moore (ed.), *Black Theology: The South African Voice* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1973).

10 Robert Beckford, *Jesus Is Dread: Black Theology and Black Culture in Britain* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998); Robert Beckford, *Dread and Pentecostalism: A Political Theology for the Black Church in Britain* (London, SPCK, 2000).

theologies? Can our national conferences begin to address some of these issues as the main theme rather than relegating them to a seminar or track focusing on the subject?

Lastly, our churches and organizations need to learn the history of racism. Part of that will mean putting into perspective the history of the modern missionary movement in the light of its collusion with colonialism. A reorientation of history is also needed so that we see not only William Wilberforce as the champion of freedom, but ex-slaves such as Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797) and Ottobah Cugoana (1757–1791) who were part of the Abolitionist movement. Part of our learning will also include knowing how European history has created people we now call African Americans, African Caribbeans, Africans and Black British. Our journey towards becoming a multi-ethnic congregation, mission agency or college requires understanding white hegemony (supremacy) and one way of doing that is to learn about black history.

# Evangelical Identity Formation in Post-colonial Britain

David A. Clark

*Modern cultural changes have divided evangelicals in many parts of the world, with some urging progressive agendas and other resisting what they consider radical ideas. Using racial justice issues as an example, this article warns against both extremes and charts a course of sensitivity toward the aggrieved as part of building a more unified church.*

## Introduction

In a short 1940 essay entitled ‘Notes on the Way’, George Orwell lamented the terrible consequences of intellectual progress. He noted that for two centuries prior, thinking men and women had acted as rebels, ‘destroyers, wreckers and saboteurs’, fighting with their pens to extract the corrupted ‘soul’ of Western society. Little did they understand, however, what the consequence of their success would be:

For two hundred years we had sawed and sawed and sawed at the branch we were sitting on. And in the end, much more suddenly than anyone had foreseen, our efforts were rewarded, and down we came. But unfortunately there had been a little mistake. The thing at the bottom was not a bed of roses after all, it was a cesspool full of barbed wire. ... So it appears that amputation of the soul isn’t just a simple surgical job, like having your appendix out. The wound has a tendency to go septic.<sup>1</sup>

Orwell’s observation stands as a warning to the progressives, reformists and rebels of all ages: *be careful as you cut*.

What might be the significance of this warning for post-colonial evangelical Christianity in the UK?<sup>2</sup> How can we open our ears to the prophetic voices in our midst and yet remain anchored in our historical identity? There is a need for change, but what will this change look like? Will the frustrated calls for repentance and reform drive so many wedges between us that evangelicalism in the UK dissolves? Or is it possible to bring about reconciliation without altering the fundamental

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1 George Orwell, ‘Notes on the Way’, in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 15.

2 I follow the definition of evangelicalism as presented in: David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Oxford: Unwin Hyman, 1989). This definition incorporates four characteristics: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism.

identity of the evangelical church? Returning to Orwell's metaphor, is it possible to prune the tree, cutting away the dead and unproductive branches in such a way that will not cause it to fall?

I realize that using the framework of 'post-colonial Britain' to address these questions may seem a bit odd. The British colonial empire dissolved over the course of the 20th century, and in political terms it seems a bit superfluous to keep calling our current era post-colonial. But in a cultural sense, the term is laden with meaning, because in many ways, colonialism is still with us. Great Britain no longer rules 23% of the world's population, but the residue of colonialism remains in politics, in the workplace, in the university and in the church. Many black evangelicals in the UK believe that the historical paradigm of white supremacy has not been entirely dismantled. Their frustration is exasperated by the fact that many white Christians don't want to talk about, much less *do* anything about it. Thus, issues related to race and racial justice will significantly affect how evangelical identity in the UK takes shape in the 21st century.

A community's self-understanding is shaped by encounters. R. A. Markus explains what this has meant for the historic church:

The whole of the church's history is a growth in self-awareness; every important encounter with a new society, a new culture, with shifts in men's assumptions about their world, themselves or God, with upheavals in the values by which they try to live, brings with it new self-discovery.<sup>3</sup>

The church in the UK is going through this process now. We are encountering new cultures and addressing changes in how we understand God, ourselves and the world. Within the church, there are upheavals—particularly among the younger generations—in our values. At this moment in history, the evangelical church will decide on the extent to which it will allow itself to be transformed along with the times. Should it dig in its heels (and perhaps die)? Or should it embrace this brave new world (and perhaps lose its soul)?

On one hand, there is a foundation that should remain in place if the evangelical church in the UK aspires to maintain continuity with the 2000-year-old self-understanding of the Christian faith. The metaphorical tree trunk should not be damaged. On the other hand, the evangelical movement must constructively embrace certain types of change if it is to remain relevant and effective in British society.

The methodology I apply, in considering how to reshape what is already in place without destroying it, can be characterized as *reconstructive identity formation*. We can think of this as a type of pruning. There are elements of the Christian faith and practice that are foundational to our identity. If these are cut, we may be left with something that calls itself the Christian church, but which has little in common with what this title has historically signified. And yet, if we are careful as we cut, we may help to ensure the tree's vitality for many generations to come.

First, I will explore the significance of postmodern culture as the context of post-colonial discourse. I will describe a reconstructive response to postmodernity in

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3 R. A. Markus, 'The Problem of Self-Definition: From Sect to Church', in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. E. P. Sanders (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 3.

contrast to deconstructive and paleo-constructive approaches. Then I will turn to some special problems that the post-colonial project asks the British evangelical church to confront. Citing examples from other evangelical communities around the world, I will argue that the paleo-constructive and deconstructive responses to these challenges fail because they do not uphold our foundational oneness. Rather, the reconstructive approach best enables us to make desperately needed changes, while not severing the trunk that sustains us.

### **Foundationalist and non-foundationalist ecclesiologies**

At the heart of postmodern philosophy is the notion of *non-foundationalism*. Over against the idea of a foundational knowledge accessible to all humans, postmodern theory contends for a plurality of knowledge claims. Anything that is known is subjectively bound to the knower; there is no *truth* apart from the truth of each individual.<sup>4</sup> Foundationalism, in contrast, asserts the existence of irreducible, universal truth—that is, truths that do not simply derive from a web of individual beliefs and experiences but stand as absolute realities.

In describing what have been the general responses to the challenges of postmodernity, LeRon Shults identifies three general categories:

- *Deconstructive response*: fully affirm the postmodern challenge and conclude that because there is no neutral knowledge, we must be content with a plurality of interpretations.
- *Paleo-constructive response*: reject or ignore the challenge of postmodernity and appeal to an earlier premodern era in which truth and knowledge were allegedly unproblematic.
- *Reconstructive response*: attempt to distinguish the positive from the negative contributions of postmodernity and aim for a reconfiguration of the task of epistemology.<sup>5</sup>

Each of these approaches has been embraced by Christian theologians across the spectrum. The deconstructive response often characterizes liberative and perspectivist approaches such as liberation, black, feminist and queer theologies. The underlying assumption in these approaches is that historical power holders and structures have dominated the interpretation of the Scriptures as a means of maintaining control, resulting in the suppression of subaltern voices. Consequently, a genuine plurality of theological interpretations cannot be achieved until these structures are dismantled.

In contrast, conservative evangelical theologians often embrace a paleo-constructive approach, characterized by a strong sense of certainty regarding the formation of Christian theology. In this view, by applying our reason to God's Word we can arrive at certainty regarding the meaning of the Scriptures for our faith and practice. The immutable truth of divine revelation and the human capacity to attain certain knowledge of it are intrinsically bound together.

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4 F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 50.

5 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task*, xiii.

At the present time, the post-colonial discourse among British evangelicals generally sits somewhere between these two extremes. Most of us aware of the dangers of each extreme, and we don't want to go there. But until this middle position is robustly articulated and actively pursued, we run the risk of bifurcation and polarization within the church.

For this reason, I seek here to present what a reconstructive approach might look like. Evangelicals should not instinctively reject all elements of postmodern theory. The post-colonial project calls upon us to analyse the power structures that have existed within our movement and to re-evaluate how these structures have shaped our understanding of God, the Scriptures and the church. A reconstructive approach considers how we can approach these elements of our faith in a more diverse and inclusive way, without destroying our foundation. Towards this end, I propose a hermeneutic of limited deconstruction.

A reconstructive approach to ecclesiology offers the possibility of creating a more diverse and inclusive evangelical church that remains true to its historical foundations. It begins with the foundationalist affirmation that the church is ontologically one. *Church* is not simply a label for the myriad of individual beliefs and experiences of Christians; it exists beyond individual belief or experience as the body of Christ. Just as Christ is real, and just as he is one, so the church exists as a single community constituted in him.

At the same time, a reconstructive approach recognizes the limitations of human knowledge. Historically, we have often erred by conflating the immutable truth of divine revelation with our own capacity to attain certain knowledge of it. We can and should be certain that the Scriptures clearly present God's vision for the church. But we should be careful when claiming that we have *absolute certainty* as to what this church should look like on earth.

The historical problem with foundationalist ecclesiology is that it has sometimes led Christians to believe that our particular expression or way of doing of church is *the* right way. In the colonial era, this attitude led to a white, male-dominated, European ecclesiology that imposed itself globally. When the gospel arrived in places such as Africa and Latin America, the development of alternative indigenous expressions of the faith was sometimes suppressed. Anything that differed from the European norm was often viewed as 'unbiblical' and wrong. Consequently, there remain elements in our current ecclesiological construct that need to be dismantled.

### **The challenges we face**

The evangelical church in the UK is in the midst of change and determining the agenda for internal dialogue presents challenges. Overall, church attendance in the UK has been in decline for some time. In 1983, 66% of the British population identified themselves as Christian and 31% professed no religion; in 2018, only 38% self-identified as Christian while 52% claimed no affiliation. The decline has been particularly notable in the Church of England, which held the loyalty of 40% of the population in 1983 but only 12% in 2018.

In the midst of these gloomy reports, one piece of good news has been the strong church attendance among ethnic minority populations. Researcher Peter Brierley reported that in 2017, 26% of all English churchgoers were non-white. Particularly



among African migrant communities, church growth has been very strong. In London, for example, African majority churches grew by 32% between 2001 and 2011.<sup>6</sup>

Citing the contribution of black churches to the changing landscape of evangelicalism in the UK, Israel Olofinjana notes:

Black Majority Churches [BMCs] have been in Britain for 70 years or more, depending on which year you attribute to their origins. Since their inception, they have faced many challenges including lack of church accommodation, rejection and misrepresentation. In the midst of all these factors they have grown to become one of the largest and fastest-growing church movements in Britain. It will now therefore be impossible to write the history of the church in Britain without proper reference to BMCs.<sup>7</sup>

As the evangelical movement in Britain experiences major shifts in its racial and ethnic composition, we must ask whether the concerns of minority ethnic churches are being addressed. Through such endeavours as Churches Together in Britain and Ireland's (CTBI) office of Justice and Inclusion, the Evangelical Alliance's One People Commission, and the National Church Leaders Forum, black and other minority Christians are making their voices heard. But what kind of progress is being made? Is meaningful dialogue taking place about the historical injustices that took place during the era of the British empire? Do African British evangelicals feel that the hurtful residue of colonialism is being confronted? Do evangelicals of Caribbean descent believe that the painful legacy of slavery and racism has been confronted?

The title of an online article by Dr David Muir suggests the answer to this question: 'Apologies are good, but the Church must do more to end racism.' Muir echoes a common frustration heard among black Christian leaders: 'If the Church is serious about apologising, then we need to see the fruit of repentance. It's something that should grow. And how can it grow? We need to start planting the seeds of opportunity, employment and power.'<sup>8</sup> Black evangelical leaders agree that changes have occurred in Britain over the past 50 years. But at the same time, many are running out of patience.

One issue of particular concern to black people of Caribbean descent is reparations for the unpaid labour of enslaved persons. A recent CTBI webinar entitled 'I Will Repay: The Church and Reparations' offered insights into the current discourse. Robert Beckford presented three reasons why the church in Britain has resisted the notion of restorative justice. First, he noted, is the problem of ignorance: 'people aren't aware of the history because it isn't taught.' Second is the problem of racism in theology: 'many of the ideas that shape the Christian tradition are steeped in racism.' And finally, he noted a lack of the 'moral courage that's needed to

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6 See ONS, 'Nomis: Official Labour Market Statistics—2011 Census: Ethnic Group by Religion (DC2201EW)', 2013, <https://worldlea.org/yourls/ert461dac1>; ONS, 'Nomis: Official Labour Market Statistics—2001 Census: Ethnic Group by Religion (S104)', n.d., [nomisweb.co.uk](http://nomisweb.co.uk); Peter Brierley, *UK Church Statistics No. 3* (Tonbridge: ADBC, 2017), section 9.

7 Israel Olofinjana, *Partnership in Mission: A Black Majority Perspective on Mission and Church Unity* (London: Instant Apostle, 2015), 15.

8 David Muir, 'Apologies Are Good, but the Church Must Do More to End Racism,' *Christian Today*, February 2021, <https://worldlea.org/yourls/ert461dac2>.

acknowledge this wrong and do something about it.’ Following up on Beckford’s remarks, Eleasah Louis described the response of young black Christians to the issue of reparations:

Young black people have seen and rejected the silence of the mainstream church on racial justice issues such as reparations. They believe that God is committed to justice for black and brown people and they are seeking spiritual religious spaces that help them make sense of the overlap between society, religion, lived reality and God’s divine plan.<sup>9</sup>

Particularly concerning about Louis’ comments is the suggestion that these religious spaces are being formed outside of the mainstream church. Young black people (along with young people of all races) feel frustrated and disenfranchised from the evangelical churches where they grew up. Although the issue of financial reparations for the slave trade is complex and controversial, ignoring it won’t make it go away. If the church doesn’t create spaces where such concerns can be discussed, young Christians will seek to address them elsewhere.

Brierley’s research already indicates a steady decline in church attendance among the millennial generation (age 16 to 34). In 2000, this generation represented one out of every five churchgoers in the UK; today it represents roughly one out of every ten.<sup>10</sup> Part of the problem, as Louis states clearly, is that the evangelical church is not addressing the issues that matter most to them.

Among British Christians who have migrated from Africa, the legacy of colonialism is manifest in a more subtle manner. The French West Indian philosopher Frantz Fanon was one of the first to put it into words: ‘Imperialism, which today is waging war against a genuine struggle for human liberation, sows seeds of decay here and there that must be mercilessly rooted out from our land and from our minds.’<sup>11</sup> In the hearts and minds of African British people today, the most painful residue of the colonial era is the psychological sense of inferiority.

To understand the current significance of this residue with the British evangelical church, we must first consider the complex relationship between the British colonial enterprise and the expansion of Protestant missions in the 19th century. Whereas the expansion of the British Empire was certainly driven by economic interests, many members of British society also claimed a benevolent aspect of British rule. A common argument in favour of colonialism ran along the following lines:

Civilized societies like Great Britain are acting in the interest of less-developed peoples by governing them. Imperialism, from this perspective, is not primarily a form of political domination and economic exploitation but rather a paternalistic practice of government that exports ‘civilization’ (e.g. modernization) in order to foster the improvement of native peoples. Despotism

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9 CTBI, ‘I Will Repay: The Church and Reparations’, 6 October 2021, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461dac3>.

10 ‘The Missing Millennials’, The Brierley Consultancy, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461dac4>.

11 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 4.

government ... is a means to the end of improvement and ultimately self-government.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas evangelical mission agencies in Africa tended to avoid formal association with the colonial authorities, the missionaries and British colonialists often shared certain assumptions in common. One of these was the sense that Europeans had the burden of extending the benefits of their civilization to less developed nations. These benefits included secular advances such as medicine, education and principles of good government, as well as the gospel. Unfortunately, the missionaries were not always successful in separating their colonial inclinations from their discipleship. Ezigbo and Williams describe this tendency in the following way:

Europe became a process that created people, inventing them socially and physically, from an imposed nonexistence and perceived savagery, into the white European imagination of a 'civilized' human being. Israel was replaced by Europe as the community of God's chosen people, and Christ became white. ...

In the story of the Western colonization and Christianization of Africa, Western missionaries and explorers spread a Christian message about Jesus that was merged with the colonial system, resulting in the creation of the 'colonial Christ', whose goal was to colonize and civilize Africans. They characterized Africa as savage and uncivilized in order to sustain and justify their claims about the Africans' need to be colonized. For the missionaries and colonialists, Africans were intellectually inferior and spiritually godless people destined to remain under the tutelage of the West in order to be made civil and authentically human.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, 'Many Christians in Africa have remained in the shackles of a colonial mentality.'<sup>14</sup> Among both African and Caribbean Christians in Britain, the legacy of slavery and colonialism has left a painful residue. Unfortunately, many of their white brethren in the evangelical church don't want to talk about it.

## Approaches that have failed

### *The paleo-constructive response*

As noted above, presently the postcolonial discourse among evangelicals in the UK is located somewhere in between the extremes of the deconstructive and paleo-constructive arguments. Both radical positions will fail to bring true reconciliation to the British church. To illustrate the type of polarization we hope to avoid, I will consider current developments among the evangelical movements in the United States and Latin America.

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12 This is a characterization of the writings of John Stuart Mill. See Margaret Kohn and Kavita Reddy, 'Colonialism', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017 edition, <https://world.ea.org/yourls/ert461dac5>.

13 Victor Ezigbo and Reggie Williams, 'Converting a Colonialist Christ: Toward an African Postcolonial Christology', in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations*, ed. K. H. Smith (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 9.

14 Ezigbo and Williams, 'Converting', 91.

In recent years, the US evangelical church has become increasingly divided against itself, providing a perfect example of why the paleo-constructive paradigm doesn't work. In a recent article published in the online version of *The Atlantic*, Peter Wehner explores the problem from various angles. He cites his interview with historian Mark Noll, author of *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*:

Noll ... argues that in various spheres—vaccinations, evolutionary science, anthropogenic global warming and the 2020 elections, to name just a few—‘white evangelicals appear as the group most easily captive to conspiratorial nonsense, in greater panic about their political opponents, or as most aggressively anti-intellectual.’ He goes on to warn that ‘the broader evangelical population has increasingly heeded populist leaders who dismiss the results of modern learning from whatever source.’ And he laments the ‘intellectual self-immolation of recent evangelical history’.

A sociologist who has been studying race and Christianity for the past three years told Wehner, ‘The divisions and conflicts we found are intense, easily more intense than I have seen in my 25 years of studying the topic.’ This research confirmed what Wehner was finding in his conversations with evangelical pastors, one of whom noted, ‘Nearly everyone tells me there is at the very least a small group in nearly every evangelical church complaining and agitating against teaching or policies that aren't sufficiently conservative or anti-woke. ... It's everywhere.’<sup>15</sup>

A common political slogan illuminates the problem. At the root of the cry to Make America Great Again is the notion that America has somehow lost its way. It is a call back to a better time when prayer was allowed in school, the borders were under control, most Americans attended church and Critical Race Theory (CRT) was yet to wield its ugly head. In the current socio-religious context, there can be no meaningful dialogue about racial reconciliation. Whereas the vast majority of white evangelicals affirm their support for racial equality, the discourse, in their view, is dominated by ‘liberals’ (such as CRT supporters) who seek to control educational institutions and indoctrinate American children with non-biblical ideologies.<sup>16</sup>

For this reason, many items on the progressive American agenda are resisted by evangelicals. As long as the race discourse is perceived as a liberal, progressive cause, it will not gain traction within the church. The paleo-constructive tendencies of American evangelicalism will always manifest themselves in a nostalgia for the golden age of the past and in deep distrust towards any proposal for the re-ordering of society.

### *The deconstructive response*

Latin American evangelicalism is also divided against itself, but in a different way. Whereas most Latin American evangelicals are very conservative in their theological outlook, a small group of evangelical academics tend to be more progressive,

15 Peter Wehner, ‘The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart: Christians Must Reclaim Jesus from His Church’, *The Atlantic*, 24 October 2021, <https://worldidea.org/youurls/ert461dac6>.

16 My intention here is not to promote CRT. However, there are legitimate concerns addressed therein that evangelical Christians should address. See Serene Jones and Fred David, ‘The Bible Talks about Slavery. So Why Are Conservative Christians So Afraid of Critical Race Theory?’ *Time*, 1 September 2021, <https://worldidea.org/youurls/ert461dac7>.

standing in silent tension with the majority. In these circles, *poscolonialismo* is a common topic of conversation, and the most common framework within which it is discussed is liberation theology.

Liberation theology has numerous positive elements, which explain its enormous impact on Roman Catholic and Protestant theology around the world.<sup>17</sup> But its Achilles' heel is a tendency among many of its proponents to work from a Marxist paradigm of class struggle. There can be no oppressed without an oppressor. In a world of limited resources, there can be no poor unless rich men are stealing their portion. Politically and economically, this expression of liberation theology rests on the foundational demand for redistribution of wealth and devolution of power.<sup>18</sup>

If these assertions were presented only as political and economic theory, they would not be innately threatening to the Christian church. However, Latin American liberation theology tends to conflate multiple expressions of power: political, economic, social and religious.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, oppressors oppress across the power spectrum.

To make matters even more complicated, liberation theologians often employ what they call a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' as a means of deconstructing the oppressive power structures that have depended on popular religion as a tool for maintaining control. Consequently, they are keen to expose any nexus that may exist between social, religious and political power holders.<sup>20</sup>

The US is frequently cast as that oppressive force that ruins everything from the North. It is not uncommon for liberation theologians to suspect collusion between

17 For a positive take on liberation theology from the perspective of a Latin American evangelical, see Harold Segura, 'Liberation Theology's Spiritual Legacy for the Latin American Church', in *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Christianity*, ed. David Thomas Orique, Susan Fitzpatrick-Behrens and Virginia Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

18 A scathing critique of liberation theology's dependence on the Marxist paradigm was delivered by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XIV) before the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in August 1994; see 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"', <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert461dac8>. With specific reference to the issue of class struggle, he wrote, 'The class struggle as a road toward a classless society is a myth which slows reform and aggravates poverty and injustice. Those who allow themselves to be caught up in fascination with this myth should reflect on the bitter examples history has to offer about where it leads.' Latin American liberation theologians responded by saying that their teaching had been mischaracterized.

19 One of the primary aspirations of liberation theology is to be contextual, rooted in the experiences of the poor. In the words of Sergio Silva, 'It is a matter of taking the context seriously, not as a mere fact prior to the theological task itself, and therefore extrinsic to it, but as an essential intrinsic element of the act of theological reflection.' Silva, 'La teología de la liberación', *Teología y Vida* 50 (2009): 93–116 (my translation). In Latin America, the oppression of the poor is a contextual reality rooted in multiple sources.

20 For a helpful overview of the topic and its influence on liberation theology, see G. D. Robinson, 'Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion: A Brief Overview and Critique', *Premise* 8 (1995), <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert461dac9>. Robinson notes, 'In light of this analysis theological categories such as sin, faith, grace, church, eschatology all become reinterpreted in a way consistent with the unmasking and demystifying of traditional ideological frameworks that maintain and promote the exploitation and oppression of the poor. ... Liberation means, therefore, to opt for the exercise of an ideological suspicion in order to unmask the unconscious ideological structures which dominate and which favor a powerful, privileged minority.'

the US government, American evangelical missionaries, and church leaders in Latin America. One example appeared in a recent blog post by a Spanish Protestant theologian and publisher who is very influential in Latin America:

I am led to suspect the existence of ‘invisible’ threads that manage, dictate and determine the policies of many religious leaders. These threads are pulled by very powerful agencies, interested in imposing their policies everywhere. ... It is an unquestionable fact that in the 1980s the Reagan administration backed evangelicals with the intention of impeding the advance of liberation theology and any socialist tendency, and of introducing neo-liberal economic theory in its place. In this power struggle, there is nothing better than to use a popular religion that is devoid of reflection and academic research into the causes of its own malaise, misery and domination.<sup>21</sup>

American missionaries working in cahoots with the US government to suppress liberation theology and advance the neo-conservative political agenda; puppet evangelical churches in Latin America—these are not mild concerns. Many Latin American evangelical intellectuals tend to believe this rhetoric. Consequently, the ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ tends to breed mistrust and divides the house against itself.

Reconciliation must begin with a fundamental affirmation of the church’s oneness. Just as there is a oneness that transcends time, geography and dogma, so there is a oneness that transcends nation, race, social class and culture. In Latin America, the US and the UK, theological discourse on topics such as freedom, equality and justice often occurs within a liberation theology framework that inadvertently undermines biblical reconciliation. Any socio-theological paradigm that privileges a construct of oppressor and oppressed, victim and victimizer, us and them—and superimposes this construct upon the church—is antithetical to the biblical model of what the church really is. In Christ, there is only *us*.

Yes, Christians have hurt and abused one another. Yes, some segments within the body of Christ have used their power to crush and destroy others. But if the church is truly a community whose identity is constituted from above—in Christ himself—then it is fundamentally one people. Socio-theological models that present race, nationality and social class as structural categories that ensure ongoing struggle and conflict will ultimately preclude the church from discovering its full unity. In the church, these differences can pose challenges to a unified identity, but they do not define who the church is.

### *Towards reconstructive identity formation*

Many of the problems the evangelical church faces today actually find their roots in the evangelical movement’s historic success. Today, there are about 660 million evangelicals in the world, with major concentrations in the Global South (215

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21 Alfonso Roper, ‘La deriva ultraderechista del evangelicalismo pentecostal y los derechos humanos’, *Lupa Protestante*, November 2018, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461dac10> (my translation).

million in Asia, 185 million in Africa, 123 million in Latin America).<sup>22</sup> Considering that in the year 1800, only 1% of Protestants lived outside Europe and North America,<sup>23</sup> the movement's spectacular growth is largely attributable to its missionary and evangelistic endeavours.

This phenomenal expansion makes evangelical exuberance understandable, but perhaps our success has become something of a liability. The global advance of the gospel may sometimes have become an end that inadvertently justified its flawed means. Today, we can better understand the missional and theological deficiencies of our forefathers. We know that they often lacked an in-depth understanding of cultural anthropology. We know that many bought into the ideology of the 'white man's burden' to civilize the nations. And we know that not that all white evangelical Christians were champions of racial justice and equality as we understand these terms today. What contemporary white evangelicals need to understand is that the gospel advanced not *because of* these racially based presuppositions, but rather *in spite of* them. We have millions of sisters and brothers in our midst who share with us the joy of salvation in Christ, and yet who often feel like inferior and undervalued members of the church. In their story, songs of praise are intertwined with songs of lament. Until the entire evangelical church embraces these songs of lament, the recognition of our story is incomplete.

In the eyes of Soong-Chan Rah, this deficient understanding of our story has resulted in a defective ecclesiology. In his analysis of the American evangelical church, he notes:

The expected triumph of an exceptional community prevents the humility necessary to engage an ecclesiology that crosses racial boundaries. An ecclesiology with a foundation in white supremacy is unable to engage the full narrative of the American church. The absence of lament in the American church reveals a theological deficiency rooted in the exceptionalism and triumphalism. The white American church is unable to lament because of deficient ecclesiology. ... The diseased imagination of evangelicalism that arises from the assumption of triumphalism and exceptionalism results in an imbalanced emphasis on praise over against lament. ... The primacy of the triumphalistic praise narrative arises from a dominant culture resting on the assumptions of supremacy.<sup>24</sup>

And so we must ask: How can this historical narrative be rewritten in a more truthful, inclusive manner?

A reconstructive approach begins with a fundamental assertion of the church's unity across racial identities. It is built upon the ideals found in the oft-quoted verse, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28). But it doesn't stop there. For the evangelical church to fully take up its song of lament, we must assert our

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22 '660 Million Evangelicals in the World?' *Evangelical Focus Europe*, February 2020, <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert461dac11>.

23 Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.

24 Soong Chan-Rah, 'Evangelical Theologies of Liberation', in Mae Elise Canon and Andrea Smith, eds., *Evangelical Theologies of Liberation and Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019), 44.

fundamental oneness with the generations who have gone before us. Just as we claim their triumphs as our own, so we must be willing to claim their flaws as our own.

This is where evangelicals can become a bit slippery. We're quick to flaunt our association with the heroes of our movement. But when we're talking about a scandal or a crisis or some form of abuse, we quickly distance ourselves. *That wasn't me. That was them. That was a previous generation. That was a different denomination.* Little do we realize that in taking this tack, we are also denying (for better or for worse) the fundamental unity of the church.

To affirm the oneness of the Christian church, we must be willing to take full ownership of its failures as well as its triumphs. Only through an expression of solidarity with our Protestant and evangelical forefathers can healing become possible.<sup>25</sup> We may be willing to acknowledge that the Church of England owned slaves in Barbados and built churches off the revenues of plantations in Jamaica.<sup>26</sup> But many of us will argue that this was an historical problem for which Christians today cannot take ownership or responsibility. This unwillingness to confess the sins of our forefathers, accompanied by a refusal to repent and seek forgiveness on their behalf, is rooted in ideological stubbornness and stands as a major obstacle to meaningful reconciliation.

Together we must sing a song of lament, and only then can we sing together a song of praise. But even then, that song of praise will need to be rewritten. We celebrate the lives of Wycliffe, Watts, Bunyan, Wesley, Wilberforce, Livingstone and Stott. To be sure, they made great contributions to the formation of British evangelical identity. But it is time to include the names of other heroes, particularly those of African descent. In describing the contribution of African American Christians, Cornel West indicates what a more inclusive understanding of our common history can look like:

What I've always tried to put forward is the best of a tradition of Black people—people who, in the face of 400 years of chronic hatred, have dished out love warriors; in the face of 400 years of fear, have dished out freedom fighters; and in the face of 400 years of trauma, have produced wounded healers and joy spreaders.<sup>27</sup>

In the same way, the story of evangelical Christianity in the UK is not told accurately or completely until it incorporates all the heroes of our movement. Have our Sunday school children heard the stories of Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, or Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, 18th-century champions of the abolitionist cause in the UK? Have they heard about Summer Road Chapel in Peckham, started by the

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25 I contend that this solidarity should be broadened to include Christians of all faiths, but that point would require further explanation.

26 Jasmine Anderson, 'Church of England Slavery Links: Why the C of E Has Apologised for Senior Figures Profiting from the Slave Trade', *INEWS*, 19 June 2020, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461dac12>.

27 Emma Green, 'Cornel West on Why the Left Needs Jesus', *The Atlantic*, 13 August 2021, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461dac13>.



Ghanaian businessman Thomas Brem-Wilson? Are they familiar with Daniel Ekarte, or recent figures such as Titus David, David Okunade and R. A. George?<sup>28</sup>

The story of the evangelical movement in the UK must be retold. Eschewing our triumphalist tendencies, we can take ownership of the darker streams in our history. We can repent on behalf of our forefathers and, in dialogue with those who still bear the pain of historical sin, we can all seek paths of reconciliation and justice. At the same time, we can tell the story in a more inclusive manner, bringing to light those marginalized and forgotten heroes who also contributed to making us who we are today.

### The methodology in review

I have attempted to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to make needed changes in the church without threatening our core identity. Reconstructive identity formation begins with the affirmation of our foundations. In the words of Isaiah, this is to 'look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug' (Is 51:1). When our foundational historical and theological identity is the *starting point* from which we address contemporary challenges, we avoid the extreme responses that are failing us. A theological commitment to the oneness of the church enables us to constructively address the challenges we face in our post-colonial context.

The paleo-constructive response to issues such as race and racial justice will fail the British evangelical church, particularly if we follow the lead of our American counterparts by simply dismissing the legitimate concerns of black and ethnic minority Christians as 'woke' or liberal. This approach offers no platform for meaningful dialogue. On the other end of the spectrum, in Latin America the deconstructive response and its hermeneutic of suspicion can lead to division and mistrust. As an alternative to these failing approaches, reconstructive identity formation offers a middle path. The affirmation of the church's oneness across generational, historical, racial and national boundaries leads us to a place where we all can celebrate our victories, even as we share in the pain of our failures. We can sing songs of both praise and lament.

In this article, I have focused on the foundational element of the church's oneness. But other core elements of historical Christianity can also serve as starting points for post-colonial discourse. Looking at the Nicene Creed, we could choose as our foundation the church's holiness, its apostolicity or its universality. The underlying presupposition of the reconstructive approach is that there is, in fact, an overarching, historical Christian identity. This is not a theoretical postulation; it is a matter of credal confession. We see our global community as united by a common metanarrative.

But the church is not perfect. Consequently, we must engage in a process of limited deconstruction or, to follow our initial metaphor, pruning. This involves taking a close look at our history and asking honest questions about the distribution of power in our movement. In the post-colonial discourse, the most pertinent

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28 See Israel Olofinjana, 'Reverse Missions: The Emergence of African Churches in Europe', *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 45, nos. 1–2 (2013), 33–154.

questions relate to cultural conquest, racism and racial justice. But other dark streams in our history need to be considered too. For example, we might re-examine the historical treatment of women in Protestant and evangelical Christianity. We might research the appropriation of cultural leadership models that have fostered abuse and spiritual neglect within our churches. Postmodern deconstruction challenges us to analyse the structures of power that have existed in our movement, seeking to identify ways in which power has been an instrument of oppression and injustice.

In this way, the reconstructive approach acknowledges the valuable contribution of postmodern critical analysis. But an important distinction lies in its approach to deconstruction. The non-foundationalist approach would not acknowledge the existence of any historical metanarrative or unifying factor among the Christian church. All that exists, as Derrida would argue, is *différance*—different interpretations of what has happened and of what it means.<sup>29</sup> Carried out to its fullest, the deconstructive process will chop and hack with no clear sense of when to stop. This is the process about which Orwell warned.

We can cut off the diseased branches but we must know where to stop. We need to know when our pruning starts to threaten the life of the tree itself. Jesus seems to have shared this same sensibility, as is evident in the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt 13:24–30).

Identity formation is a process in which we are called to partake. I write from within a British context, but the illustrations I have cited from abroad suggest that many evangelical communities around the world are experiencing something of an identity crisis. The task of identity formation calls us to look at our past in light of what we know and see happening today. It is not a process of historical revisionism, as we are not trying to distort or manipulate historical events. To the contrary, we seek a fuller understanding of the historical truth, recognizing that we cannot know fully *who we are* until we embrace *who we have been*.

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29 See Theodore George, 'Hermeneutics', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 edition), <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert461dac14>.

# The ‘Sins of Equals’ and Racial Justice

Leah Farish

*Evangelicals believe that Scripture and the great confessions of faith remain relevant to our modern lives. This short essay demonstrates that relevance by applying a little-known passage from the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648 to race relations.*

I live in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the midwestern United States. Last year, our city somberly observed the 100th anniversary of the recently named Tulsa Race Massacre, during which two days of widespread violence left a thriving part of our city in ashes. As a civil rights attorney, I grapple frequently with the issue of race. As a Christian, I look for spiritual inspiration to help us recognize the value and equality of human beings.

To my surprise, I have discovered that the Westminster Confession of Faith and its accompanying Larger Catechism, finished off with a flourish of quill pens in 1648, have much to teach us in this regard.

When the Westminster Larger Catechism reaches the Fifth Commandment, ‘Honour your father and mother’, it applies this commandment not just to our parents but to all relations with our ‘superiors’ (which at the time referred to those with greater power, resources and status rather than denoting finer personal qualities or competence). The Catechism then presents a series of questions on our responsibilities not only to superiors but also to those below us in rank or prestige (our ‘inferiors’) and our ‘equals’. I was struck by these two questions and answers regarding relations with equals:

Q. 131. What are the duties of equals?

A. The duties of equals are, to regard the dignity and worth of each other, in giving honour to go one before another; and to rejoice in each other’s gifts and advancement, as their own.

Q. 132. What are the sins of equals?

A. The sins of equals are, besides the neglect of the duties required, the undervaluing of the worth, envying the gifts, grieving at the advancement or prosperity one of another; and usurping preeminence one over another.

How might we begin to apply this gloss on the commandment to race relations today? First, the Catechism accords dignity and worth to every person. It also acknowledges that we all have duties towards each other and that we are prone to sinning against our equals by undervaluing, envying or seeking preeminence over them.

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**Leah Farish** (JD, Baylor Law School, USA) has practiced civil rights and adoption law and taught at the college level for over 20 years. She has published three books on US constitutional cases and has published numerous articles on legal issues including religious freedom.

The appeal to common sense is great here. Whether or not I am my brother's keeper, the Catechism communicates inescapably that I am my brother's brother. The moral playing field is level by virtue of our common humanity. As Irwyn Ince, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in America's General Assembly, says in his recent book *The Beautiful Community*, 'Christian community shares mutual love expressed in mutual obligation.'

Some might still object that racial groups do not seem to be equal in power, privilege or numbers in many places. But in God's eyes, there is no question that each person is equal in 'dignity and worth'. That is one possible meaning of Romans 12:15: 'Be of the same mind towards one another.'

The second duty named, in question 131, to 'go before' one another in 'giving honour', sounds quaint. But it gives us an important procedural orientation. We might rephrase it in terms of more powerful people letting others have a chance at the microphone, or a seat at the head table. This is a moment in history where the opportunity to have a voice is often deemed just as important as the content of the message. And whether a particular voice should be heard is a question answered procedurally—is it *your turn*? Some groups are perceived to have dominated the podium long enough, 'neglecting the duties required' by not offering a turn to others.

One of the sins committed against equals, according to question 132 of the Catechism, is to 'usurp preeminence' over each other, or to 'undervalue' each other. When one group has had preeminence over another, by definition the two groups have not been functioning as equals. When those sins have gone on for years, healing is deeply needed. The Catechism, articulating Scripture, identifies both the problem and the solution.

In my hometown of Tulsa, I have served as a consultant for a new girls' school in a predominantly Black part of the city. In exploring enrichment materials for our students, we have found a wealth of fresh writing by and/or for Black children and teens, such as *Bee Fearless* by Mikaila Ulmer, *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds, *Opal's Greenwood Oasis* by Hylton and Lansana, *Serafina's Promise* by Ann Burg, *Defined* by Priscilla Shirer, and *Gay Girl, Good God* by Jackie Hill Perry. Will these displace *Little Women* or *The Hiding Place*? Of course not. But we don't have to undervalue one voice to hear another.

Jesus urges us to walk a narrow way, because 'broad is the path that leads to destruction' (Mt 7:13). I see the narrow way as the balanced one, between two wide sides that extend off infinitely into extremism in both directions. To ignore past or present 'undervaluing of equals' is evil. But on the other hand, envious retaliation is also wrong. The New Testament letter of James discusses wisdom in the face of conflict—a wisdom 'from above' that is 'without partiality, and without hypocrisy' (Jam 3:17). Instead, believers are called to a path of joy, rejoicing in each other's gifts and advancement as if it were their own (Catechism Q. 131). Honouring and advancing each other is the best way forward. We should pursue this way energetically, without falling into partiality or hypocrisy.

Dr. Ince describes the Fifth Commandment as calling us to hold authorities to account for how they wield power over us. In a democratic republic where 'we the people' govern, as the US Constitution states, this is particularly important. But the

most obvious application of the Fifth Commandment is to honour our literal and figurative fathers and mothers—our forebears, our heritage, our founders, our culture. This is essential. And there is one parent we can all honour together—God the Father, who can unite us when no one else can. Dr. Ince, himself an African-American, urges believers ‘to locate their primary identity in Jesus Christ ... [to] avoid cultural idolatry’.

The Fifth Commandment offers high rewards for those willing to observe it: living long in the land. We face an existential threat if we disobey, but a promise of long life and prosperity if we can go forward together as equals.

# Book Reviews

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Silke Muylaert, *Shaping the Stranger Churches:*

*Migrants in England and the Troubles in the Netherlands, 1547–1585*

## ***African Hermeneutics***

**Elizabeth Mburu**

Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: HippoBooks, 2019

Pb., xviii + 234 pp., bibliography, indices

*Reviewed by Rist Nigussie Assefa, Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology,  
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

Elizabeth Mburu is a Kenyan biblical scholar, associate professor of New Testament and Greek at Pan-Africa Christian University in Nairobi, Kenya, and Africa Regional Coordinator for Langham Literature. In *African Hermeneutics*, Mburu argues that African Christianity is challenged by ‘dichotomized lives’ that separate faith and life, due to Western reading approaches which are ‘foreign’ ways of interpreting the Bible. Hence, she proposes a solution of ‘contextualized hermeneutics’ for Africans.

The book has two main parts, general and specific principles of hermeneutics. The first part discusses the African worldview and hermeneutic, providing an explicit foundation regarding the theological and philosophical aspects of the African worldview that influence the interpretation and understanding of Scripture.

Mburu presents an African hermeneutic model named the 'four-legged stool', which I consider innovative and the main contribution of the book. The model is presented by analogy to an object that is familiar to African societies, with four legs that support a seat. In the model, the four legs represent the four contexts: parallels to the African context, theological context, literary context, and historical and cultural context. The four in combination lead to an accurate application, which is represented by the seat. Just as a stool is stable and able to support weight, we can place our weight on the four-legged hermeneutical stool to attain an accurate interpretation of the Scriptures.

In discussing the importance of contextualized hermeneutics, Mburu uses the example of Paul's conversation with the Athenians in Acts 17:16–34, emphasizing the phrase 'the unknown god'. She insists that in the African hermeneutical approach, the interpretation process begins with the African context (leg 1), which is the 'known', aiming to move to the 'unknown'. Nevertheless, Mburu stresses that one leg is not more or less important; rather, all four legs are equally essential.

In Part II, Mburu connects the 'four-legged stool' model with the main genres of the Bible: 'stories', 'wisdom', 'songs' and 'letters'. She begins by relating the biblical genres to the African context (leg 1), followed by the theological, literary and historical contexts (legs 2, 3 and 4) sequentially. In addition, Mburu demonstrates the similarity between African and biblical literature in terms of function, style and other aspects. For instance, retribution theology presented in biblical stories, wisdom, and songs exists in a traditional African worldview that views life in terms of retribution and reward. The one who does what is right could expect a reward, whereas the wrongdoer would be punished.

Mburu elucidates that, unlike the other genres that have an African source, the 'letters' are new to Africa, coming from the influence of colonialism. Consequently, a description of an 'African letter' would be ambiguous and would weaken the argument. In addition, it would raise the questions of how a letter without an African source could be called African and how all parts of the Bible could be contextualized based on the four-legged stool model.

Mburu offers a variety of credible and persuasive examples (including proverbs, stories and songs) from different African countries to explain and clarify her ideas. Furthermore, the book is written with a flow of thought that follows a clear sequence, with the second part building on the first part. Review questions at the end of each chapter guide readers to reflect on the discussions. Mburu also presents a 'tentative application' after the discussion of each stool leg so that the reader can consider the practical ramifications of her ideas. Generally, the book is clear, readable and presented in easily understood language.

Overall, *African Hermeneutics* encourages all readers to understand and interpret Scripture using their own cultural lenses and to see things from the reader's context, since one cannot live without relation to one's culture and worldview. I recommend the book to missionaries, ministers, students and academics.

***Washed in the Spirit:  
Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Water Baptism***  
**Andrew Ray Williams**

Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2021

Pb., 283 pp., index

*Reviewed by Geoffrey Butler, PhD student, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto*

Through his doctoral dissertation turned academic monograph, Andrew Ray Williams puts forth the first comprehensive, constructive account of water baptism from a Pentecostal theologian. With eight chapters which consider—among other issues—the historic practices of numerous classical Pentecostal denominations, their interpretation of crucial biblical texts on baptism, and the relationship between water and Spirit baptism, Williams' volume is certain to have an impact on the further development of Pentecostal sacramental theology for years to come.

Williams begins by briefly introducing the context of his research and the methodology which shapes it. Indeed, his chapter on contemporary Pentecostal theological method will be of interest to anyone interested in constructive theology within the movement, not only regarding the sacraments. Because his work aims to 'approach the subject in a way that is representative of the broader Pentecostal tradition' (8), he employs Chris E. W. Green's 'blending of Pentecostal periodicals, constructive ecumenical resources, and engagement with key biblical texts', as used in the latter's 2012 volume on a Pentecostal theology of the Lord's Supper. Those who have read that work might detect resonances in Williams' work—not surprisingly, since Green was his dissertation advisor.

Chapters 3 through 5 survey the early periodical literature of several classical Pentecostal denominations, including the Foursquare Church, International Pentecostal Holiness Church and Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, respectively. Williams' choices reflect his desire to be 'representative of the broader Pentecostal tradition', encompassing the Finished Work, Holiness and Oneness streams of Pentecostalism. Perhaps the most intriguing components of these chapters are his 'fieldwork', or his visits to congregations from each branch of the movement, to interview participants in baptismal services and record their testimonies. Non-Pentecostals may be surprised that, among Oneness adherents, 'baptism was considered essential for salvation for all informants' (164). Aside from their rejection of historic trinitarianism, this insistence on baptism as salvific clearly distinguishes the Oneness tradition from mainstream evangelicalism to a much greater degree than the Foursquare or Holiness Pentecostals.

Chapter 6 discusses the historical reception of key baptism texts within Pentecostal tradition, specifically Romans 6:1–11 and Acts 2:37–40. Williams states that his interaction with them is framed by a distinctly Pentecostal hermeneutic (174). Although this comment might appear obvious to some, it highlights the scholarly context of Williams' work. The fact that Pentecostals have only begun developing their distinctive hermeneutic fairly recently helps explain why they have not yet developed a distinctive theology of baptism. Green's impact on Williams' work is again evident as he lauds, and consciously imitates, the former's ecumenical approach and explicitly theological interpretation of Scripture (174). Moreover, his



division of the Pentecostal reception of these biblical texts into four distinct historical periods helps readers follow the maturation of the movement and, consequently, its sacramental theology. One controversial proposal is that 'Pentecostal churches ... ought seriously to consider receiving believers baptized as infants into their fellowship, recognizing them as truly baptized Christians' even if credo-baptism remains normative (225), exceeded perhaps by the suggestion that trinitarian Pentecostals should recognize Oneness baptisms performed 'in Jesus' name' as legitimate too.

Chapter 7 focuses on constructive theology, with Williams acknowledging that to date, 'there have been few efforts to formulate a distinctly Pentecostal theology of the sacraments' (226). Of special interest is his discussion of the relationship between water and Spirit baptism. Williams breaks with much of traditional Pentecostalism, in addition to scholars such as Wolfgang Vondey; he suggests that adherents should speak of only one baptism and adopt the position advanced by Clark Pinnock, who preferred to describe post-baptismal experiences as 'actualizations'. Williams contends that while 'the Spirit falls in baptism, the Spirit is realized in experience throughout a lifetime' (252), and he concludes with several ecclesiological implications of his work and avenues for further research. These include the development of a Pentecostal theology of ordination, resourcing passages such as John 3 and 1 Peter 3 for the purposes of constructive theology, and granting more explicit attention to the sacramental nature of baptism in the Oneness stream.

Although many traditional Pentecostals will be uncomfortable with some of Williams' constructive claims, his contribution is timely; indeed, the volume may seem long overdue for those who have been raised within Pentecostalism and are thus aware of how important water baptism is for the movement on a practical level. Perhaps the disconnect confirms Frank Macchia's assessment, as quoted by Williams, that 'Pentecostal theology must still catch up to Pentecostal experience when it comes to the sacraments of the church' (83). Works such as this one, over time, will help the movement do so. It is also a worthy companion to Green's monograph on the Lord's Supper and, as noted, is sure to encourage further discussion of the sacraments by Pentecostal scholars.

### ***Constructing Paul: The Canonical Paul (vol. 1)***

**Luke Timothy Johnson**

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020

Hb., xiv + 385 pp., bibliog., indexes

*Reviewed by Benjamin Marx, Lecturer of Bible and Theology,  
Instituto Bíblico Sinodal Arequipa, Peru*

In this excellent book, Luke Timothy Johnson is not constructing an 'historical Paul' but the 'canonical Paul'. By this, he means that he dedicates his study to the entire *Corpus Paulinum* (CP) as well as the book of Acts ('an invaluable secondhand primary source') rather than focusing on certain writings such as Romans and Galatians. Through this atypical approach, Johnson seeks to present a polythetic rather than a monothetic understanding of Paul and also to 'liberate his letters for

the present'. Volume 1 serves as an introduction and framework for *Interpreting Paul* (vol. 2), in which more detailed studies are presented.

In part one, Johnson assesses diverse sources, our knowledge of Paul's life and ministry, Pauline correspondence, and Paul's place within early Christianity (the 'historical scaffolding' of the book). In part two, he moves to the symbolic world of the apostle, exploring what kind of Jew Paul was, how he engages Scripture, and his engagement with Greco-Roman cultures. In the third part, Johnson treats Paul's experience and modes of discourse, listens to Paul's voice in Philemon, and asks whether Paul is an oppressive or liberating voice for us today.

Refreshingly, Johnson admits openly that he does not engage the subject from a neutral or objective standpoint, but 'as an admirer and advocate' of Paul. This, however, does not hinder his thorough academic and historical investigation.

From the beginning, Johnson is sceptical of the scholarly consensus regarding 'undisputed' and 'disputed' letters of Paul. He considers that distinction fallacious, because even within the so-called undisputed letters, different styles and themes can be detected. Johnson describes attempts to group the letters in this way as 'simply bad science'. Moreover, trying to find a development in Pauline thought is also difficult, as a chronological layout of his letters is simply not present.

Johnson sees the 13 Pauline letters in the New Testament as 'authored' (or author-ized) by Paul but not necessarily written by the apostle. He proposes an alternative theory of authorship, viewing the Pauline correspondence as 'both socially and literarily a complex process' in which secretaries, co-sponsorship, and teaching practices in community (midrash and diatribe) play major roles. Thus, a Pauline 'school' could be imagined, with Paul and his co-workers sitting, thinking and writing together under the apostle's direction.

In addition, instead of an undisputed vs. disputed corpus, Johnson proposes five stylistic and thematic clusters in the *CP*: 1–2 Thessalonians; 1–2 Corinthians; Galatians and Romans; Colossians and Ephesians; 1–2 Timothy and Titus (which he calls 'letters to delegates' instead of the usual 'pastoral letters'). Philippians and Philemon are still linked with Paul but do not fit within these five clusters, although in chapter 10, Johnson offers an interesting proposal concerning the relationship between Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians (similar to proposals regarding the relationship of the Johannine letters).

Johnson demonstrates that Paul 'shares and interprets the language and perceptions of the Christian movement antecedent and contemporary to him' by examining the books of James, Hebrews and Revelation. Thus, Paul cannot be viewed as the 'founder' of Christianity. Furthermore, Paul—being deeply embedded in the world of Torah (especially the Septuagint)—sees himself as 'the prophet of the Messiah' in the line of Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Moses.

In addition, Paul's engagement with Greco-Roman culture is obvious but not as deep as many have surmised. According to Johnson, Paul had a 'rudimentary knowledge of Greek education, rhetoric, philosophy, and religion'. Johnson is also quite sceptical of anti-imperial and postcolonial studies of Paul.

With regard to Paul's personal experiences, Johnson observes that this element has often been left aside in academic studies even though they are prominent in the

*CP*. The most prominent such events for Paul were his encounter with the risen Christ and his subsequent experiences of divine power via the Holy Spirit.

In his last chapter, Johnson raises the question: ‘Paul, Oppressor or Liberator?’ Again, Johnson complains that many people advocating anti-Pauline stances study only certain texts. On the other hand, ‘any effort to “fix” a Pauline theology ... ought to be seen as suspect.’ Paul is a complex author, and we need to take the anthropological, historical, literary and religious dimensions of the *CP* seriously. The *CP* advances ‘a radical vision of human life that is grounded in the experience of God’s presence and power in the empirical world, a vision of life that offers an authentic liberation—not at the level of social arrangements but at the level of existence itself.

If someone is looking for a first introduction to Paul, this might not be the best place to start. But for those who wish to deepen their understanding of Pauline thought and current discourse, this is a tremendously helpful and thought-provoking book. I am eager to read Johnson’s second volume.

### ***The Mission of the Triune God: A Theology of Acts*** **Patrick Schreiner**

Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022  
Pb., 155 pp., appendix, indexes

*Reviewed by Benjamin Marx (see previous review for affiliation)*

What are the major theological themes in the book of Acts? Patrick Schreiner argues that a trinitarian reading of the book helps to clarify the issue. To understand the theology of Acts, he says, one must closely follow the order and artistry of Luke’s narrative and let the narrative itself shape the theology. According to Schreiner, at the heart of Luke’s theology is the Trinity, from which every other aspect flows.

This work is the second volume in the new *New Testament Theology* series, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Brian S. Rosner. The goal of the series is ‘to approach the text from the perspective of biblical theology ... maintaining sight of the Bible’s overarching narrative and Christocentric focus’ (13). According to the editors, ‘Acts is about resurrection life, the expansion of the temple of the Lord, and the advance of the word of the Lord’ (14).

The author structures Acts according to seven major themes: ‘(1) *God the Father* orchestrates; (2) through *Christ*, who lives and rules; and (3) through the empowering *Spirit*; (4) causing the *word* to multiply; (5) bringing *salvation* to all; (6) forming the *church*; which (7) *witnesses* to the ends of the earth’ (26; emphases his). Of these seven, the first three take a prominent place. There are also two excursions, on Christology in Acts (59–63) and the Law in Acts (125–132).

A total of 30 illustrations and tables help the reader to understand the book’s concepts. This is a very helpful feature for which Schreiner is already known (see his *The Visual Word: Illustrated Outlines of the New Testament Books*, 2021). He also provides pop-culture references, usually at the beginning of the chapters, which some might find helpful.

At the center of Acts is the mission of God (*missio Dei*), which has a trinitarian shape. The Father's plan focuses on his exalted Son 'and goes forth by the empowering Spirit' (16). Schreiner argues that Acts is 'a model, a prototype, an exemplar for the renewal of the church' (20). Usually, the debate centres on whether Acts is a descriptive or a prescriptive piece of literature; Schreiner describes it as a transitional and programmatic book. It is transitional in recounting events which cannot be repeated (e.g. the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost) and are exclusive to the beginning of church history. It is also programmatic in that it 'provides guidance for the church in every age' (21). The purpose Luke pursues in Acts is assurance: God has accomplished and fulfilled his promises in Jesus Christ (23).

There are different proposals as to who the major actors of Acts are. For Schreiner, God the Father orchestrates everything (similar to the works of Darrell L. Bock and John T. Squires), and at every juncture of the journey one sees God directing the story (34). The kingdom of God is the content of God's plan which focuses on the exalted King, Jesus (this is in step with recent scholars like Scot McKnight, Matthew Bates and Joshua Jipp). Acts recounts the work which the exalted King continues through his followers, who are empowered by the Spirit. The resurrection life of the King is spread throughout the narrative: 'The apostles not only *witness* to the resurrection; they also *perform* resurrection' (51; emphasis in original). The followers of Jesus constitute, through the work and presence of the Spirit, the new temple of God (66) which Schreiner calls the 'mobile temple community' (69). This also correlates with the Lukan (and a biblical) 'embodied view of salvation' (96). We are saved *from* something (sin, Satan, death) *to* something (communion with God and the participation into his new community, the church).

Lastly, throughout the book Schreiner demonstrates how Lukan ideas, themes and emphases stem from books of the Old Testament (e.g. Genesis, Ezekiel, Isaiah). It is a delight to see the different connections he makes throughout the Christian canon. This is a brilliant book written by an excellent scholar. Soon his *Acts: The Christian Standard Commentary* (B&H Publishing, anticipated 2022) will be published as well, and I very much look forward to his fleshing out of his ideas in a more detailed exegesis.

***God (in) Acts:***  
***The Characterization of God in the Acts of the Apostles***  
**Christine H. Aarflot**

Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020  
Pb, vii + 284 pp., bibliog., indices

*Reviewed by Benjamin Marx (see previous review for affiliation)*

This book, a revised version of Aarflot's fine doctoral thesis, looks at how God—obviously one of the main actors in the book of Acts—is portrayed, particularly through his actions. She reasons that one could probably speak of the 'Acts of God' rather than the 'Acts of the Apostles' (as others such as Steve Walton have pointed out). In addition, Aarflot also considers how the ascension of Jesus impacts the

characterization of God. This is very interesting because it represents a reversal of common Christological enquiries. Usually, the question is formulated as how Jesus resembles and is related to God, but Aarflot asks how God is portrayed by the exalted Christ in Acts. For her, the character of Jesus, as seen in Acts, takes over some of God's actions (comp. e.g. 2:17 with 2:33). 'God's characteristics come to characterize Jesus more and more' (231) and this in return impacts the portrayal of God.

In her initial literature review, Aarflot discusses various major works in the field and the differences between her work and that of Ling Cheng, *The Characterization of God in Acts: The Indirect Portrayal of an Invisible Character* (Paternoster, 2011). Aarflot admits that she came across Cheng's work only towards the end of her project. In contrast to Cheng, Aarflot more fully incorporates 'the cultural encyclopedia' of the reader (17). She reasons that socio-cultural dimensions of a text are crucial for reading Acts.

As her primary objective is to scrutinize God's portrayal of Acts through his actions, Aarflot's key method is narrative criticism (following Tannehill, Johnson, Gaventa, Spencer, Green and now Bauer). Although narrative criticism is her 'chief methodological strategy' (24), she also incorporates insights from other methods, such as her use of rhetorical criticism when looking at some of the speeches in Acts. The longest chapter, on 'Method and Material', explicates narrative criticism with extensive detail and illustrative examples. She finds the characterization of God via his actions in narrative events or in the different speeches encountered in Acts. In this way, God is portrayed indirectly rather than directly.

The book contains too many gems to be enumerated in this review. One highlight is Aarflot's observation that 'God frequently becomes the starting point in the apostles' proclamation' (2), pointing to 2:17; 3:13; 5:29-30; 7:2-3; 10:34-36; 13:17; 14:15; 17:22-24. Her statement that God is 'a helper in the apostolic mission' (2; also 83) puts things too mildly. But overall, her work demonstrates a profound engagement with Acts and secondary literature. She presents a detailed analysis of six major episodes in Acts: 'The God of the Last Days (Acts 2:1-41)', 'The God of Glory and Heaven: Stephen's Speech and Vision', 'Who Are You, Lord?' (on Paul)', 'God's Impartiality (Acts 10:1-11:18; 15:1-21)', 'The Faithful God: Paul's Proclamation in Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52)', and 'God as Savior at Sea' (27:1-44). This analysis is then broadened by other actions of God not yet covered in the previous chapters (e.g. 'signs and wonders' language). And finally, a synthesis of God's portrayal via his actions in Acts is offered.

In Acts, God is presented very similarly to his portrayal in the Septuagint. This is no surprise, as Acts follows in the steps of biblical history using the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. According to Aarflot, in Acts we see a God who is behind every step in the movement from Jerusalem to Rome. In her conclusion, Aarflot reiterates the finding that 'God is, above all, presented as *faithful, judge, and savior*' (232; emphasis hers).

Aarflot's work wonderfully enhances our understanding of who God is. Citing Acts 4:12 ('for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved'), she rightly points out that the God of Acts 'cannot be known *apart* from Jesus' (243; emphasis hers). Her study not only contributes to our

understanding of God but, through her exemplary writing style, demonstrates that academic work can be a joy to read.

***The Third Education Revolution:  
Home School to Church College***  
**Vishal Mangalwadi and David Marshall (eds.)**

Pasadena: Sought After Media, 2021

456 pp., Kindle

*Reviewed by Jim Harries, missionary in Kenya and adjunct faculty member for  
William Carey International University*

Vishal Mangalwadi, the visionary behind this book, is an inspiring man, and the book's theme is no doubt close to the hearts of many. Giving 'our children to secularists to train and disciple ... is ... like ancient children of Israel giving their children to the Philistines to educate' (210), one contributor suggests. This book portends a revolution. Use of the church—both the physical location and the body of Christ—as an alternative (or supplement) to secular schools is the central theme.

When 'the Western world stopped compelling worship, they began to compel education' (204). Few nowadays question the need for compulsory education, whereas compulsory church attendance seems a distant shadow. Why? History needs rewriting. Many Christians will agree. But how to do it?

This compendium covers three main themes: (1) the third education revolution, (2) the rise and fall of Western education and (3) the Great Commission to educate nations. Diverse authors, united by their advocacy for a re-Christianization of schooling, provide cases from around the world, favouring the linking of students to churches.

Contemporary churches bless rather than critique 'the murder of children, the emancipation of women from womanhood, and the sowing of the seed of life in a sewer' (95). We need a return to virtue in education. Secular education guided by Marxism must be displaced. Social media, 'a worldwide beast' and a 'deadly force that is dividing society' (Mangalwadi 382), must be reshaped. The task is great!

This book runs ahead of reality. 'Responsible freedom' is difficult, one contributor tells us (368), reminding us of Israelites in the desert 'voting for' a return to Egypt. Believers will agree that Christianity brings liberty, but evidence for that claim in today's media is largely absent.

The text is itself at times self-critical of the church. 'The evangelical Gospel [in Uganda] fails to equip the church to guide the nation' (317). The rot is real and deep. Readers might ask: do we need an 'education revolution' due to crisis or due to Christ? The need for revolution, perhaps deliberately being concealed today, is exposed in this book. The challenge is to each of us: have we reneged on our responsibility for our children?

Deep appreciation for changes advocated in this book comes within its pages from Germany and especially the USA. Mentions of Africa rely mostly on exposure through short-term visits.

In today's world, the very dearth of evidence for value in Christian education is surely a product of the secular hegemony that this book deplores. This is why it is on target. Dualistic presuppositions (the church on one side, education on another) run deep in many of us. Around the world, secular education is widely perceived to be the breath of life! (Around the world, many children spend virtually all their daylight hours—up to seven days a week, year after year throughout their youth—imbibing secularism in school, using foreign tongues.) How has this come about? Do we remain silent? True believers cannot consider the secular to be source of life.

Possibly beginning in the USA, where Christian education remains a strong tradition, churches should invite students onto their campus to be coached by 'academic pastors'. Other countries can follow. Difficulties in implementing such a strategy must be cracked. After all, as the founder of Protestantism stated, 'I am afraid that universities will prove to be the great gates of hell unless they diligently labour in explaining the Holy Scriptures. . . . Every institution in which men are not increasingly occupied with the Word of God must become corrupt' (Luther, cited on pages 95 and 219). Luther, in fact, planted the seed that led to universal education (351).

The call for revolution is apt. In some senses, it is a wavering call; evident barriers abound. This reflects the kind of uncertainty that Moses undoubtedly felt when standing by the burning bush, hearing God's message that he would be used to rescue his people from Egypt (Ex 3:8). For those who are called, like Moses, to impossible tasks—get the book, read it and then act.

### ***Old Testament Use of Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide*** **Gary Edward Schnittjer**

Zondervan Academic, 2021

Hb., 884 pp., introduction, indices, glossary, bibliography

*Reviewed by Andrew Messmer, Academic Dean, Seville Theological Seminary (Spain); Associated Professor, Facultad Internacional de Teología IBSTE (Spain); Affiliated Researcher, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit (Belgium)*

In this large book, Gary Schnittjer offers the church and the academy a first: a comprehensive, book-by-book treatment of the Old Testament's use of the Old Testament. After the introduction, in which he presents key definitions and his methodology for detecting and evaluating usage, the following 35 chapters cover all the books of the Old Testament (following the *BHS/BHQ* order). Each chapter contains four main parts: (1) three lists, presenting the use of other Old Testament books in the particular book, the use of the particular book in other Old Testament books, and the use of the particular book in the New Testament; (2) the 'hermeneutical profile', which summarizes how the particular book uses other Old Testament books; (3) a text-by-text analysis of each use of other Old Testament books in the particular book; and (4) filters which include examples of non-exegetical and/or non-allusive parallels between the particular book and other books of the Old Testament. Two concluding chapters apply some of the book's findings to the New Testament and discuss 'networks' of passages that are frequently evoked and used throughout the Old Testament. This final chapter functions as a capstone

to the entire work and provides readers with images of how key passages are (re)used throughout the Old Testament.

The book's focus is not on simple quotations, allusions or echoes, but rather on 'interpretive interventions'—that is, how one text intentionally uses and (re)interprets another one. Schnittjer's criteria for identifying these interventions are based on verbal, contextual and syntactical similarities (similar to Richard Hays' well-known criteria), and he employs a five-tiered rating system (A–F) which reflects the extent to which each intervention adheres to his criteria. The objectivity that Schnittjer attempts to employ is balanced by his admission that 'many elements pivot more on art than science.' His transparency is greatly appreciated.

Schnittjer states that this work is not for scholars, but rather was 'designed as a reference study for students and ministers of the word'. Fortunately, all groups will be able to read and benefit from it, as the book has maintained the difficult tension between thorough academic research, on one hand, and accessibility to a wide readership on the other. The bibliography includes well over 1,000 works (almost all in English), and his multiple indices (spanning more than 100 pages) greatly facilitate the reader's ability to look up specific texts of interest. Citations of original languages are translated into English, with key Hebrew and Aramaic vocabulary placed in bold to further assist the non-specialist.

This book could easily be used in several settings: as a textbook for a class on intertextuality or hermeneutics, as a reference work for pastors who need help in sermon preparation, and as a beginning point for scholars and professors who are researching or teaching the material.

### ***Shaping the Stranger Churches: Migrants in England and the Troubles in the Netherlands, 1547–1585***

**Silke Muylaert**

Leiden: Brill, 2021

Hb., 238 pp., bibliography, index

*Reviewed by Andrew Messmer (see previous review for description)*

In this publication of her doctoral thesis, Silke Muylaert has provided a helpful study of the relationship between the migrant churches in England and developments in the Netherlands during four decades of the 16th century, especially as it relates to the Dutch Revolt. Although she does not treat issues such as doctrine and theology *per se*, her focus on historical, economic and social factors gives us a helpful context by which to understand them better. Muylaert demonstrates mastery over the secondary literature (especially English, German, Dutch and French) and has interacted deeply with primary sources.

Chapter 1 focuses on the exchange between the Low Countries and England (especially London) from 1547 to 1565, along with the major church figures Lasko, Utenhove and des Gallars. Chapter 2, the only non-chronological chapter, looks at the relationship between the foreign churches and the Low Countries as a whole. Chapter 3 covers the years 1560 to 1565, considering the foreign and Low Countries' churches different responses to persecution, resistance and revolt.



In chapter 4, Muylaert focuses on 1566, the so-called 'Wonderjaar' in the Low Countries, and takes a close look at iconoclasm and again the two church bodies' different responses. Chapters 5 and 6 both cover the same period, 1567–1585, but chapter 5 examines the military assistance that foreign churches provided to the Low Countries during the Dutch Revolt, whereas chapter 6 describes how they promoted and advanced the Reformed churches in the Low Countries.

This book is helpful in making many important distinctions that are often overlooked or otherwise melded into one monolithic phenomenon. The foreign churches under Edward VI (1550–1553) were not the same as those under Elizabeth I (1558–1603). For example, the former group was relatively small (just three churches) whereas the latter group consisted of more than 20, and the former were more influenced by Zurich, Frankfurt and Strasbourg, the latter by Geneva. The consistory leadership (especially in London) was generally more opposed to resistance and revolt in the Low Countries, whereas the laymen (including deacons) were more in favour of it. The French-speaking foreign churches tended to remain aloof from the Dutch Revolt, whereas the Dutch-speaking foreign churches were much more interested. The foreign churches in London were closer to English politics and supervision than those in the provinces. From 1568 to 1575, the foreign churches supported the Low Countries with financial and military assistance, whereas from 1575 to 1585 they supported them spiritually by providing ministers to keep their churches alive and going.

Several groups of researchers would be interested in this work. Migration researchers would be interested in evaluating the experiences of tens of thousands of migrants who passed between England and the Low Countries during these four decades. Minority group researchers would be interested in the various responses exhibited on a spectrum from assimilation to radicalization (a timely issue for many European countries today). Reformation researchers would be interested in the coverage of second- and third-tier Reformation figures such as Lasko, Utenhove, Cousin and others. They would also benefit from seeing how political, economic and other factors contextualized and influenced what could be perceived as purely theological matters.

Although the overall quality of the book is solid, two minor critiques may be mentioned. First, the argument of the individual chapters can be hard to follow. Some chapters include multiple sentences that begin 'This chapter will ...' but are not united by a single theme. This makes it difficult to find the key argument of each chapter. Second, while it makes sense for Muylaert to focus primarily on the Dutch churches and secondarily on the French ones, there is hardly any reference to Spanish or Italian churches and leading figures. For example, there is no mention of the Spaniards Casiodoro de Reina, Cipriano de Valera and Marcos Pérez, and only brief mention of Antonio del Corro, although all of them lived and ministered in London and/or Antwerp, with some of them playing significant roles in religion and politics.

The contents of this book would be more accessible to a greater audience if they were reduced to a lengthy article and if the findings were more fully incorporated into the theological and ecclesiastical debates between the various Protestant and Catholic groups of the time.