Animism

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Animism

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Editor's Note

Zane Pratt

Animism, in a broad variety of forms, is the global religion of a fallen world. Animism is found on every continent, and it asserts itself even in the most secular of societies. Animism can be defined as a belief in spirits and supernatural forces that interact powerfully with human life. This includes both personal spiritual beings such as demons and the jinn, and forces such as witchcraft. Animism proceeds from a three-layered cosmology. Secular materialism sees the universe in a single layer consisting of the material world ruled by naturalistic cause and effect. Western Christianity, deeply influenced by secularism, sees the universe in two tiers. The material world is one of those tiers, and the other tier is God, existing above the material world and largely disconnected from it except for occasional miraculous interventions. Animistic worldviews often include an upper tier for a supreme God but add a middle tier between that God and the natural world in which spirits and supernatural forces work. For most animists, this middle tier is the most important. The fortunes of life, whether good or bad, are ascribed to these spiritual forces, and much of their energy is expended appeasing or even manipulating those forces.

Animism interacts syncretistically with every world religion. In many parts of the world, it constitutes that actual religion of the population, with a thin veneer of the local formal religion on top of a deep well of animistic thought and practice. This is true in nominally Christian cultures in much of the developing world. Christo-paganism can be found all over Latin America, Africa, and Asia. It can also be found, to varying degrees, in more developed societies. In particular, prosperity teaching is a form of animism that seeks to manipulate God using various forms of Christian practice to gain health and

wealth. This syncretistic blend of Christianity and animism may well be the greatest global threat to biblical faith in the 21st century.

In contrast, a biblical cosmology has three tiers, but God is deeply involved in both the world of spirits and magic and in the natural world, and he is sovereign in both. A biblical worldview neither ignores the spirit world nor obsesses over it. Biblically faith pastors and churches guard against any form of animism that seeks to corrupt the faith once delivered to the saints. This edition of the journal explores various aspects of animism from the perspective of Christian mission. Our hope is that it will not only be useful for missionaries, but also for first world Christians as they pursue biblical faithfulness in their mission both at home and to the ends of the earth.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Animism, Then and Now

Dr. Kevin Rodgers

Animism is a term that many use; yet, few truly understand. Historically, it was the purview of missionaries working among tribal peoples, who soon discovered that it could easily lie beneath the surface of a religious veneer. Today, it has become more pervasive than ever imagined, with former mission fields reverting to traditional religions and the West embracing more provocative aspects of magic, witchcraft, and spiritism.[1]

In its purest form, Animism is defined as the belief that every living thing and, ostensibly, inanimate object, possesses a soul, or is *animated*. Early definitions of animism assumed that all primitive peoples believed every object possessed a soul and was "animated."[2] In 1871, Edward Tylor wrote *Primitive Cultures* and coined the term animism to describe individuals who believed in these other spirits, as he thought that spiritualism (his preferred term) would be misunderstood.[3] Because of Tylor's penchant to overgeneralize, animism

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1   For a discussion of the movement of traditional Kikuyu Christians embracing and reviving their traditional animistic practices and beliefs, see Patrick Maina Kamau, "Cultural Revival among Kikuyu Christians: Impact and Implications in the 21st Century," *Spring Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, May, 2024, https://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/items/644affdb-c2e3-4d2c-9a92-93d26ba46aa7.

2   People groups and traditional religions that are labeled as animists are incredibly diverse. Some "animists" believe that certain rocks and trees possess a spirit or soul, but in this author's experience, others do not. Animistic beliefs are as varied as the people who hold them, and it is important to understand that early attempts to understand tribal people and traditional religions sometimes fostered gross generalizations. For more information on the evolution of the term, see Tiddy Smith, "Animism," *Internet Encyclopedia of* Philosophy, https://iep.utm.edu/animism/.

3   Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1871), 385. While Tylor uses the term animism broadly, he was trying to focus on what he believed to be the most primitive form of religion. He tended to speculate in armchair anthropology and relied on anecdotal evidence from missionaries

might not be the most accurate term to describe the worldview of traditional religions steeped in spiritism and witchcraft. Yet, it has become the popular word to describe people worldwide who believe that unseen spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces influence every aspect of daily life.

Fascinatingly, as formal religions grow in some places and Western influence and secularism increase in others, animism is rising everywhere. Animism is a pervasive, syncretistic weed of a worldview that can thrive equally among the most religious or on atheistic college campuses. This article will argue that its influence can be observed from various ancient folk religions around the world to this generation's fascination with the supernatural, magic, and anime (an ironic word choice). These animists range from the religious constructs of Shintoism in Japan, which navigate the spiritual world of the Kami, to the Amazonian who offers sacrifices to ancestral spirits for a successful hunt, to the American who appeals to a fortune teller for guidance from loved ones who have passed away.

From Tylor to Today

Thirty-five years ago, Gailyn Van Rheenen penned his classic, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts.*[4] Although the book has never been revised, it remains a seminal work for missionaries and Christian anthropologists studying animism worldwide. This work serves as an approachable primer on all aspects of animism, blending academic missiology with personal experience from his time as a field missionary among the Kipsigis in Kenya. Although this article is not intended to be a review of *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, Van Rheenen's work provides an appropriate springboard for discussing animism today.

One would be hard pressed to find a better definition of animism than what Van Rheenen offered in 1991: "*Animism is the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to*

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and other observers. In the late 19th century, *Spiritualism* and mediums were quite fashionable in England, so he preferred the term animism to not conflate what primitive peoples were doing in other parts of the world with what some in Europe practiced. This would have interfered with his unilinear evolutionary hypothesis of religion.

4   Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991).

determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power."[5] His definition holds several key themes that should be explored again in current animistic contexts. This definition emphasizes the concept of a *belief system*, the *holistic nature of beings and forces*, the *centrality of human affairs*, and the core tenet of *power* that binds the animistic worldview together.

The Animistic Belief System

Some would describe animism as a religion; however, this is somewhat of a misunderstanding.[6] While there are elements of religious belief in animism and some consistency among animistic expressions worldwide, animism is not a codified religion but rather a worldview perspective with a loosely held set of religious beliefs. For example, the expression of animism in Africa is often referred to as ATR (African Traditional Religion). Yet, ATR varies broadly across the continent of Africa, and the aspects of ATR that are consistent from people group to people group are often those that are more common to animism than to formal religion.

Winifred Corduan defines religion as "A system of beliefs that by practicing its cultus directs a person toward transcendence and, thus, provides meaning and coherence to a person's life."[7] Animism and Traditional Religions are systems, but they are so varied and contextually specific that it is difficult to classify or group them. Corduan reminds us that a formal religion has a system, a cultus or set of beliefs and practices, and a purpose (which he names transcendence). Formal religions are consistent and codified, possessing a history, a founder, and often a priesthood and sacred writings that define their theology. Animistic expressions (such as ATR, for example) typically lack those elements.[8] Traditional religions around the world are much more

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5   Van Rheenen, *Communicating* Christ, 20.

6   Tylor was one of those who not only saw Animism as a religious expression, but also as the primordial form of all religions. However, Katherine Swancutt's excellent article argues that "Animism is a particular sensibility and way of relating to various beings in the world." While all animism has religious aspects, it is more of a worldview perspective and ontology than a religious system. See Katherine Swancutt, "Animism," *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, June 25, 2019, https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/animism#:~:text =Although%20the%20term%20 'animism'%20can,physical%20processes%20in%20the%20body.

7   Winifred Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religion*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2024), 16.

8   Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists*, (Columbia, SC: Impact International Foundation, 1996), 44.

nebulous and contextually determined. They often manifest syncretistically within other formal religions, creating constructs like Folk Islam or Folk Christianity. Yet, the animistic concepts found in Van Rheenen's definition of beings and forces, the centrality of human affairs, and the tensions between fear and power are fairly consistent across all animistic, traditional religions.

This raises the question, if animism is a system but not a religion, then how is it systematic? A survey of animistic cultures worldwide reveals remarkable similarities in certain worldview characteristics.[9] *First, animism posits that the unseen world is as real and relevant as the physical world in which we live.* In fact, animists believe that the spiritual realm impacts all aspects of the physical realm. *Second, animists tend to have a holistic worldview.* They see no distinction between the seen and unseen; all coexist in cosmic harmony. Western Platonic dualism resists that notion. Paul Hiebert called this tendency the "flaw of the excluded middle."[10] This refers to the fact that the post-Enlightenment West has historically maintained a scientific perspective on the physical world and a sterile, distant perspective on the unseen world, which involves God, heaven, and the afterlife. Animists, Hiebert would argue, believe in a middle realm where spirits, ancestors, magic, and other forces influence daily life in the present, physical realm.

In recent decades, evangelical missionaries have attempted to address this *flaw of the excluded middle* by being more thorough in contextualization and resisting the influences of their own Western, scientific worldview. Many teach a biblical cosmology in tribal contexts, which includes biblical emphases on the reality of the spiritual world and the cosmic connection of the seen and unseen realms. This unseen realm is rightly populated with biblical examples of spiritual beings, such as angels and demons, and the focus is rightly centered on God and the spiritual battle being waged in the heavenly realms. Yet, for some animistic peoples, this attempt to address the *excluded middle* has only resulted in an "expanded middle."[11] Instead of replacing

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9   Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ*, 27. He remarks that "animism is not a consistent worldview, but a multiplicity of worldviews with similar characteristics."

10 See his original treatment of this phenomenon in Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review* 10, no. 1 (Jan 1982).

11 A. Scott Moreau, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Reference Library, 2000), 363. Hiebert mentions two possible extremes when dealing with the excluded middle: one was to reject it altogether, and the other was to attribute every circumstance to spirits and magic. Moreau coined this second excess as "the expanded middle."

their animistic cosmology with a biblical one, they have syncretized biblical Christianity with animism and simply added to their existing worldview.

The Holistic Nature of Beings and Forces

Besides identifying animism as a belief system, Van Rheenen's definition emphasizes the reality of spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces that work in tandem. He says, "Beings are personal spirits that include God, gods, ancestors, ghosts, totemic spirits, nature spirits, angels, demons, and Satan."[12] Additionally, he continues, "Forces are impersonal powers. They include the power behind the use of magic, astrology, witchcraft, the evil eye, and other related phenomena."[13] While these concepts vary widely in animistic contexts, they are consistent in that aspects of spiritual beings and magical forces are found in every animistic society worldwide.[14]

Animists believe both beings and forces tend to be ambivalent toward the physical world. Magic can be either good or bad, used for healing or for harm. In Zambia, nothing occurs by coincidence because all physical issues have a spiritual origin.[15] When someone in the village dies, there is a spiritual reason and a person responsible. Typically, a person dies because someone employs evil magic to kill them. It is then necessary for the bereaved family to hire a Witchfinder to determine who is responsible. Yet, the Witchfinder uses magic to find the witch accused of committing murder through magic, and sometimes the witch who used the evil magic purchased the magic charm from the very Witchfinder employed to uncover him or her. Magic is a force that can be used for good or evil, depending on the character of the one who wields it.

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12 Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic* Contexts, 21.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid. 19. Van Rheenen notes that in animistic societies, beings and forces tend to blend, and there is not always a clear differentiation between the two. R.H. Codrington (a missionary and contemporary of Tylor) first posited the idea of this impersonal spiritual force in his work among the Melanesians. [See R.H. Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in Their Anthropology and Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891)]. He utilized their term *mana* to describe this impersonal spiritual force, akin to the English word *magic*. Tylor's and Codrington's differentiation between beings and forces led to this popular distinction in anthropology.

15 All examples noted from Sub-Saharan Africa are derived from this author's twenty-seven years of experience on the continent as a church planter, educator, and cultural anthropologist who engaged in ethnographic research among animistic peoples.

Other forces are often contextually specific, like *Baraka* in East Africa or the "Evil Eye" in Central Asia. *Baraka* is the Kiswahili word for blessing, but it is a loaded term in an animistic worldview. It is common in Kenya for people to ask for a blessing or to give a blessing, and the power of the blessing is often connected to the power of the person more than the power of God. This worldview aligns seamlessly with Neo-Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. The "man of God," or prophet in a local church, is often paid to pray for people and bestow *baraka* upon them because he has some spiritual quality that ordinary Christians do not possess. Often, the practices of faith healers in Africa are indistinguishable from those of the witch doctor before Christianity came. The "evil eye" is another animistic concept where someone has the power to curse you through a malevolent glare. Blue amulets are prevalent across the Muslim world, which are said to protect the owner from the evil eye and will often absorb its power, breaking in the process, indicating that a new one needs to be purchased.

Personal spiritual beings can include God or gods, but they are often more accurately described as ancestral spirits, clan spirits, nature spirits, or angelic beings such as demons or jinn.[16] While these beings can be ambivalent toward people in the physical world, they do interact with them. Therefore, it is necessary to appease them if one has wronged them somehow, or to appeal to them if one needs something specific. These personal spiritual beings often serve as guardians against the breaking of taboos. In the Northwestern Province of Zambia, it is common for the spirit of a recently deceased person to inhabit their coffin during the burial, leading the pallbearers to find the offender who cursed them, and confronting them from beyond the grave. The accused must pay a fine to the deceased's family and confess before they can be released, and before the pallbearers can be freed from the influence of the ancestral spirit controlling them. In many parts of the world, people make sacrifices to placate offended spirits or offer gifts to appeal to the living dead to meet their needs or intercede with God, who will then resolve their problems.

Animistic people reside in the delicate liminal space between the physical and the spiritual, often navigating their lives as if they are traversing a minefield. They carefully avoid upsetting the spirits that govern their lives while thoughtfully selecting the right means to appeal to them for assistance. These

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16   See Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic* Contexts, 237-273.

personal spirits and impersonal forces are whimsical, capable of causing harm as easily as providing help. Consequently, the power of fear influences the animist in their day-to-day existence. These beings are not worthy of worship and certainly cannot be trusted, yet they remain indispensable to daily life. Life becomes a delicate balance between placation and manipulation of forces that transcend human control.

Centrality of Human Affairs

Another subtle nuance of Van Rheenen's definition is the centrality of human affairs. At the end of the day, selfishness drives animism and folk religion as much as fear does. This is why animism is more of a worldview than a religion, though it has religious overtones. The heart of animism is not about worshipping a God who is worthy or about the beauty of grace and the power of His love. The question at the heart of animism is, "How can I get what I need today?" It is not just about figuring out which spiritual force or being is affecting me, but "how can I ensure they are working for my good, and even, how can I manipulate them to ensure my success?"

For the animist, problems are always spiritual in origin, even if they are physical in manifestation. Problems like hunger, sickness, poverty, etc., are real-world problems with an unseen world source. Additionally, they also have a spiritual, unseen realm solution.[17] Thus, the animist navigates his day-to-day earthly affairs by operating correctly in the spiritual realm. The right charm or fetish, avoiding taboos, placating ancestors who are watching, and following all relational protocols using traditional means are the kinds of earthly actions that ensure spiritual success. This focus on human affairs means that jealousy is a huge hurdle for most in the animistic world, and the most important thing one can do is live a layered, secretive life in a complex, high-context, indirect world.

Core Tenet of Power

One final aspect of Van Rheenen's definition that must not be overlooked is the importance of power. Fear has already been mentioned as a significant motivator in animistic societies. The opposite force of fear is power.[18] Ani-

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17 Steyne, *Gods of* Power, 37.

18 See Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures.* (Middletown, DE: Time Press, 2017), 25. This book covers the recent missiological discussion of cultural paradigms that

mists tend to fear what might happen, and they live their lives cautiously to prevent that fear from becoming a reality. These spiritual forces and beings are not benevolent unless properly manipulated, so one must be mindful of how they live. This proclivity for fear and the feeling of powerlessness are likely contributing factors to the success of the gospel among some tribal peoples.

The gospel offers a relationship with the Supreme God of the Universe, who loves us and died for our sins. His gift of salvation is one of grace that cannot be earned. This is good news for those who spend their lives trying to be good enough to elicit benevolence from spiritual beings they do not personally know or trust. Jesus provides power over sin and death, as well as abundant life today. These are compelling answers to the questions that animists are asking, and it is no wonder that historically there was significant gospel advance in places like Africa, South America, and even ancient pagan Europe. Yet, as this article has already mentioned, there were also pitfalls.

One major pitfall is syncretism. Often, animists and followers of traditional religions will add Jesus to their existing religious worldview, making Him one of many spiritual beings they appeal to. This is especially true in polytheistic traditional religions like Folk Buddhism and Folk Hinduism. Additionally, the quest for power over life's circumstances has led many animists to view the gospel as another magic charm or the sinner's prayer as a magic incantation rather than as an expression of repentance and faith. This author has personally observed believers in African churches respond to multiple invitations and pray to receive Christ several times, just to cover their bases. This not only exposes the weakness of their faith but also reflects a misunderstanding of salvation.

This approach to the gospel sees it much like a magic charm that might work for a while but must be renewed if one sins again. Animism is a works-oriented worldview; you are rewarded by the spirits for following the rules and punished by them for breaking the rules. They have their own reasons for helping you, and so there is no grace involved, only mutually aligned interests between you and the spirits. When this worldview is translated into a commitment to Christ, it is challenging for the new believer to grasp concepts like grace, the love of God, or that Jesus does more than just temporarily

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influence various parts of the world. Those constructs include shame/honor, guilt/innocence, and fear/power. Contrasts of fear and power are significant in the tribal, animistic world.

cleanse you; you are actually reborn as a new creation. Animistic cosmology has no space for concepts like this, so while it seems that many respond in faith, some are seeking power for living and are not truly being converted.

Even the animist's perception of sin is not always biblically aligned. Sin is not the violation of biblical principles and offending a holy God, but instead, it is the violation of cultural norms and doing things that displease the spirits or others in the community. Thus, if something is done secretly and no one knows, it is not a sin. However, once the sin becomes public, one becomes guilty. In many cases, animistic people are driven by shame and honor, and sin is not sin unless it brings shame to the individual and his community. When sharing the gospel with someone from an animist background, one must emphasize personal responsibility and the holiness of God. There is a difference between worldly repentance, which comes from being caught, and godly repentance, which comes from a broken heart that realizes it has offended the holy God.

Conclusion

The worldview perspective of animism is fascinating and complex; however, it is not one to take lightly. Christianity has made significant advances among tribal, animistic peoples and folk religions with traditional, animistic undertones. Yet, as Christianity has spread, there is a growing sense that, beneath the surface, little has changed. In some areas, we observe individuals returning to traditional religions and labeling Christianity as colonial Western oppression rather than the faith of the one true God. In other regions, we see a thin veneer of Christianity overlaying a deep-seated syncretistic worldview where animism flourishes unchecked by the gospel message. Still, in other locations that have become fully secular, there exists a revival of latent animism influencing those who have no confidence in the Bible as the word of God but who hold every confidence in the constructs of magic, werewolves, vampires, and Eastern mysticism.[19]

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19 This author contends that Animism is currently reviving in the secular West, particularly in the United States. If one agrees with Van Rheenen's perspective that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces are the central tenets of animism, one can observe a growing fascination with those things in American society. The influence of the New Age movement is a growing desire for spirituality that satisfies one's emotional needs, divorced from accountability to and a relationship with Jesus. This has been coupled with animistic constructs (beings and forces) that reside in our pagan history. Magic, werewolves, witches, vampires, and other monsters are not recent Hollywood inventions, but aspects from America's pagan, European prehistory. Japanese Anime leans heavily on the animism of Shintoism, and even Zombies and the living dead are embedded

Some of this is driven by Hollywood, and some by idle fascination with New Age ideas. Yet, one wonders if there is not a bit of latent animism worldwide. The quest for power and the fear of the unknown are universal, sinful conditions, and the focus on self and the desire to succeed through one's own cleverness and strength are characteristics of every lost person who ever lived. Perhaps the tribal, pagan groups of today are more culturally inclined to be openly animistic. Yet, if you dig far enough back into the history of any people group, you find animistic roots. This is why animism and paganism were rife in the Bible, and perhaps why they are so universal today. Animism existed then and still exists now. The only answer to the deep, pervasive roots of animism is genuine life change through repentance and faith. Without true conversion, animistic peoples will simply be inoculated to the gospel instead of being changed by it.

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in the mythology of African Traditional Religion and Voodoo. While Hollywood and Western secularism often attempt to tie these storylines to plausible scientific or alien phenomena, the forms employed are almost exclusively animistic in origin. It appears the West is returning to its animistic roots of paganism, with a good dose of hedonism thrown in as well. For connected research, see https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

Engaging Bidayuh Indigenous Beliefs with Christian Theology

JT Smith

Introduction

The Bidayuh are a people group in East Malaysia (Borneo) that is estimated to be 60% Christian.[1] Though many Bidayuh claim to be Christian, Bidayuh believers face a significant theological gap when integrating their spiritual worldview with Christianity. The goal of this article is to examine several cultural practices that are challenging for Christians to think about biblically and then demonstrate how indigenous thinkers can bridge this gap, offering biblically faithful and culturally relevant answers to questions that Western resources often overlook, and using all this to show the importance of training indigenous Christian theologians.

Animistic Practices Among the Bidayuh Indigenous

To better understand the challenge of discipling believers from animistic backgrounds, this section will examine the Bidayuh spiritual worldview by examining their view of omens, mystical transformations, and black cloth.

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1   "Bukar Sadong, Bidayuh," Joshua Project, accessed 3 June 2025, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/10993/MY.

Cosmology and the Role of Omens

The Bidayuh believe that spiritual communication is an essential aspect of daily life. Farming decisions, particularly in padi (rice) cultivation, are based on interpreting omens from the natural world. A *dukun*, or shaman, facilitates communication with the spirits, helping to determine the suitability of the land through signs such as the appearance of animals or the calls of birds. Similarly, omens guide hunters and even soldiers, particularly in times of war or battle, where birds' calls can signal either good fortune or imminent danger.[2]

Western theological resources, influenced by scientific rationalism, often dismiss these practices as primitive superstitions. However, to the Bidayuh, omens represent a way of navigating the intersection of the spiritual and material world. Western Christian teaching that focuses solely on modern agricultural techniques or scientific explanations for natural phenomena fails to address the deeply spiritual worldview of the Bidayuh people.[3]

In terms of theological reflection, indigenous theologians should teach that while God may use natural signs, ultimate trust and guidance must come from a relationship with the Creator. A biblical approach to addressing the reading of omens must recognize that God has communicated through unique means, as seen in stories like Gideon's fleece (Judges 6:36-40) or the pillar of cloud and fire (Exodus 13:21-22). However, unlike animistic beliefs, where omens are often manipulated to gain favor or power, the Bible portrays God as sovereign, not subject to manipulation by humans.

Mystical Transformations: The Barui Tradition

Generally known among the Bidayuh elders, the practice of *barui*—transforming temporarily into animals or objects—is another deeply spiritual aspect of Bidayuh cosmology. Individuals with this ability are believed to possess unique powers that can aid in farming, hunting, and warfare. For example, Bidayuh soldiers who can transform into animals are thought to gain strategic advantages in battle, making them invincible or granting them the ability to evade detection.

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2   William Nais, *The Study of Dayak Bidayuh Occult Arts of Divination* (Kuching: Sarawak Literary Society. 1993), 22.

3   "*Statement on Spiritual Warfare (1993)*," Lausanne Movement, July 14, 1993, https://lausanne.org/content/statement/statement-on-spiritual-warfare-1993.

Western Christianity, influenced by materialism and rationalism, may view these stories as fanciful or irrelevant to theological discourse. However, to the Bidayuh, these transformations signify a real interaction between the human and spiritual realms. They see *barui* as a way to harness spiritual power for practical purposes, such as survival in hostile environments.

Biblical theology also speaks of *transformation*, though with distinct differences. For example, Jesus stated that no one can be saved without being born again (John 3:1-8). Paul spoke of those in Christ being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18) and also being a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). These texts emphasize that these biblical transformations are divine, permanent, gradual, and purposeful, whereas *barui* often serves human desires for control over nature and others.[4]

Indigenous theologians can teach that transformation in Christian teaching points to God's redemptive work in Christ, but *barui* represents a distorted desire for power. They should emphasize that true spiritual power lies in submitting to God's will, not in manipulating spiritual forces for personal gain. This teaching must be contextualized in a way that acknowledges the spiritual heritage of the Bidayuh while pointing them toward a deeper understanding of biblical truth.

Symbolism of Black Cloth and Spiritual Protection

Commonly a part of Bidayuh cosmology, black cloth is not merely a cultural symbol; it is perceived to be a powerful spiritual tool. It is worn as protection against evil spirits, particularly by infants, who are considered vulnerable to being lured away by malevolent forces. During funerals, black cloth is worn to shield mourners from the spirit of the deceased, who may pose a danger if not properly appeased through rituals.

To Western Christians, the wearing of black cloth may appear to be a harmless cultural tradition, but for the Bidayuh, it holds deep spiritual significance. Western theology, when focused more on doctrinal correctness without considering spiritual protection, may fail to engage with the fears and concerns that drive this practice.

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4   Dean C. Halverson, "Animism: The Religion of the Tribal World," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 15, no. 2, (Apr.-June 1998).

The Bible speaks extensively about spiritual protection, particularly in Ephesians 6, where Paul describes the "armor of God" as a defense against spiritual forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:10-18). Rather than relying on black cloth as a form of camouflage from evil spirits, Bidayuh Christians can be taught to trust in the redemptive power of Christ's death and resurrection, which provides ultimate protection and deliverance from evil. The blood of Jesus is what shields believers from spiritual harm, not ritual objects or superstitions.

Another distinction relates to the fact that animists often merge the ideas of spiritual and physical protection in that they seek to guard against spiritual powers that can cause physical pain and suffering in the material world. In Matthew 10:28, though, Jesus states that we should "not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." From a different perspective, Peter states that suffering in this life is a necessary part of following Christ, but ultimately, as Paul states in Romans 8:31-39, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Thus, Bidayuh believers need to reorient their thinking away from practices that focus on physical protection from spiritual powers. Instead, they need to realize that suffering is part of God's plan for us, but even still, our future is certain because of Christ's finished work on the cross.

Indigenous theologians should focus on teaching that while cultural symbols can have value, spiritual protection comes from a relationship with Christ, who has defeated the powers of darkness (Colossians 1:13-14, 2:15). The symbolic language of the Bible, such as being "clothed in white robes" (Revelation 7:9), can serve as a powerful counter-narrative to the Bidayuh belief in the protective power of black cloth.

The Need for Indigenous Theologians

Examining the previous three cultural issues among the animistic Bidayuh helps us see the need for indigenous theologians. Each cultural practice revealed a complex issue where beliefs about the spirit world are intertwined with the daily life of the Bidayuh. Helping believers to evaluate these practices from a biblical perspective is a complicated task. They must examine the various aspects of the practices and then interpret the biblical texts that relate to them so that they can determine which aspects are unbiblical and should be rejected and which aspects are permissible for believers. This task requires both cultural knowledge and theological acumen.

Reflecting on the issues in the Bidayuh context points to the importance of missionary anthropologist Paul Hiebert's "flaw of the excluded middle."[5] Hiebert explains that for those from animist backgrounds, the spirit world is the most significant part of their worldview; however, since the spirit world is typically not a significant part of the Western worldview, Westerners often fail to address issues of the spirit world when they share the gospel with or disciple those with this worldview. The result is that unbiblical beliefs and practices related to the spirit world often continue after animists come to faith.

This result is true in the case of the Bidayuh, where some reverted to traditional beliefs after converting to Christianity, which might be attributed to the inadequate presentation of the gospel. Christianity might have been introduced in a way that aligns with or conforms to the Bidayuh worldview, leading to misunderstanding. Evangelistic efforts might have been vague and not adequately explained the transformative nature of the gospel. In many cases, Bidayuh see Christianity as a more powerful way to meet the traditional expectations of their current belief system, rather than a complete transformation of those beliefs. Thus, Christianity may be embraced as an enhanced means of fulfilling existing spiritual needs rather than as a wholly distinct faith.

Indigenous theologians must be more thoughtful and culturally aware of presentations of the gospel that emphasize true commitment and the shift from traditional practices. This has important implications for indigenous theologians, requiring sensitive and open discussions, as the issue is often not theologically straightforward. Thus, a great need exists for indigenous theologians who can navigate these challenges and help local believers think biblically about their context.

After equipping indigenous theologians to engage with their cultural heritage through a biblical lens, they can foster a deeper and more transformative faith among indigenous believers. This includes evaluating omens, rituals, and symbols from within a Christian framework that acknowledges the spiritual world but rejects unbiblical practices and places Christ as sovereign over all creation. This approach also empowers indigenous theologians to become cultural translators, that is, people who help their communities

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5   Phil Barnes, "Missiology Meets Anthropology: The Life and Legacy of Paul G. Hiebert" (PhD dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 92-96.

navigate the complexities of faith in a way that honors their traditions while leading them toward the truth of the gospel.

For this training to be effective, indigenous theologians should engage in theological reflection that is both biblically faithful and culturally relevant. They should learn to ask critical questions about their own cultural practices, discerning which elements can be redeemed and reinterpreted within a Christian framework, and which must be rejected. Of course, as this article has shown, Scripture should be the primary lens through which these practices are evaluated. This process of theological discernment is crucial for ensuring that the gospel is not simply layered on top of existing beliefs but transforms the entire worldview of the community.

Conclusion

The spiritual practices of the Bidayuh people, such as reading omens and using black cloth for protection, reveal a deep connection to the spiritual realm. Western theological resources, shaped by naturalism and rationalism, often fail to address these concerns, leading to difficulties for indigenous converts in reconciling their faith with their cultural heritage. By training indigenous thinkers, the church can provide biblically faithful and culturally relevant responses, strengthening Bidayuh Christians' faith while allowing them to engage with their cultural traditions in a way that honors Christ and transforms their worldview.

Reaching Africa's Heart

Understanding the Core Beliefs of Traditional Religion for Effective Discipleship

Lew Johnson

Traveling through most towns or cities in Sub-Sahara Africa, visitors encounter a mixture of poverty and affluence, religious houses of worship, bars and shops. A blend of Baptist, Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic and Pentecostal church buildings with crosses prominently displayed dot the landscape.

The appearance is that Christianity dominates the religious beliefs of the people. Yet, under the outward façade lies an enemy that fights against biblical Christianity: African Traditional Religion (ATR). ATR is a form of animism. Animism is the belief that all living beings and inanimate objects possess a spirit, and these spiritual forces influence everyday activities of life and are present everywhere. Animism is fluid and able to adapt to new cultures and religions, and it fights against attempts to bring those in its grasp from the darkness into the light.

In Africa, ATR was once the undisputed king, reigning over men, women and children from one generation to the next. When challenged by Christianity or another religion it adapts and integrates. ATR allows its followers to carve out a religious niche in any of the major world religions while not releasing them. The chokehold is tight and deadly for those in its grip.

Curses, power, evil spirits, and similar questions come up regularly while teaching pastors in Africa. At a Maasai pastor training in Kenya, the conversation turned to curses and the power of spoken words over a believer. Some pastors questioned whether a person could even be a Christian if they had been cursed. This led to a discussion about pastors charging large fees to go and "break the altars" or "cast off" curses from families.

How should local churches address issues such as curses, magic and spirit possession? These are challenges animists struggle with. Essentially, they are asking if the Bible and Jesus are sufficient and able not only to save them, but also to overcome evil powers and protect them if they leave the traditional practices.

To address these questions, it is best to begin by looking at what followers of ATR believe. Additionally, an examination of the relationship between man and power is important when reaching followers of ATR with the gospel.

Basic Beliefs

ATR is complex. It is impossible to say ATR has standard and universal beliefs found everywhere. There are many forms and variations, often among the same ethnic group. ATR is localized in belief and practice as well as adaptable to changing circumstances.

However, there are basic beliefs which are found among most followers of ATR. These are:

- *Belief in God or a Supreme Being*

- *Belief in ancestors*

- *Belief in spirits*

- *Belief in magic*

These beliefs look different depending on where a person is from, but they will be there in some form.

God

It has famously been said missionaries did not need to convince Africans of the existence of God when they arrived in Africa.[1] Belief in God is foundational and unquestioned in nearly all African cultures.

In ATR, God is seen as the creator of all things and is ultimately in control. God is there, but unconcerned for the most part with what happens to man. God is distant. There is no desire on his part to interact with his creation. There are various stories about why this is, but the common thread is God became angry with man and left him alone.

Ancestors

The ancestors are to be respected. Ancestors are called the living dead. Although they have passed on physically, they are still alive in the spirit realm.[2]

Ancestors watch over their families and communities. They care for the people and desire a relationship with the living. The ancestors have physically left the earth and became mediators between men and the spirit world. For this reason, ancestors must be kept happy. If the taboos of a group are not kept, the ancestors will punish violators or entire families. If the ancestors are not honored, they will bring sickness, calamities, or death to the ones who dishonored them.

Ancestors give guidance to the living leaders and individuals. They help them navigate the world around them since they have walked before them. The ancestors want to see their families and communities thrive while also demanding respect and honor.

Spirits

Although God is distant, the spirit world is not. Spirits exist and are real to followers of ATR. The spirit world is all around and although not seen physically, their influence is seen and felt everywhere.

There are good spirits which will help man as well as bad or evil spirits who are to be avoided. Good spirits might heal someone or bring blessings to a family or individual. Bad spirits are there to cause evil and problems.

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1   Yusufu Turaki, *Engaging Religions and Worldviews in Africa: A Christian Theological Method* (Bukuru, Nigeria: Hippobooks, 2020), 173-174.

2   E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition,* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 184.

Evil spirits can often possess people, cause sickness, death, infertility, poverty, and many other disastrous things. People go to great lengths and expense to keep evil spirits at bay.

The spirit world influences daily life for followers of ATR. People attempt to manipulate the spirits to gain blessing on themselves and to bring misfortune on competitors or enemies. This can be done through the use of magic.

Magic

To navigate the complexities of ancestors and spirits, people resort to magic. In ATR, magic can be good or bad. Good magic discovers the source of a sickness, protects, and helps people succeed. Bad magic is used to curse, cause evil, sickness, and even death. Magic is used to manipulate the spirits or ancestors into getting what a person desires in this world or to counteract a curse put on them.

People take extreme measures to avoid being cursed because they fear magic and curses. They use charms, chants, rituals and amulets to protect them from magic or to curse others. Performing the correct sacrifice or saying the right words in the right way, obligates the spirits to give people what they desire.

Man and Power

In ATR man was created by God but not in the image of God. This is a major difference from Christianity. Man is only one of God's creations and not a special creation according to ATR.

Man's greatest need in life is power. Power is needed for protection from spirits, ancestors, curses, and other men. Power is needed for success in business. Power is needed to live a successful life. What is a successful life in ATR? It is a life of physical prosperity in family, wealth, land, children, honor and respect here and now in this world. People manipulate the spirits to get the power and the success they desire. Those who are more successful have more power. Those who are in poverty, diseased or struggling are not powerful in ATR.

Religious Impacts of ATR Today

The search for power is the main reason the so-called prosperity gospel is so prevalent among Africans. It offers them what ATR seeks: worldly success and material prosperity now.

One other important consideration in ATR is that there is no need for redemption or restoration with God.[3] God is distant but that is not the concern for an animist. Living a successful life and joining the ancestors are the goals. Reconciliation with the creator and heaven are not what people seek. For this reason, many churches in Africa struggle to make disciples. Jesus is simply another way for them to gain power. The people do not seek what the Bible tells us to seek, instead people seek power not Jesus.

Syncretism

Syncretism is rampant in the African church. Unfortunately, many in the church are not concerned with syncretism. Their focus is on gaining power through any available means, whether it is through Jesus or other spirits. Jesus is too often only useful as far as he will give them the power they desire.

One challenge with making disciples among animists and particularly among ATR followers, is that they expect to receive something if they follow a ritual properly. If people say a prayer properly, using the right words, they expect the spirits to give them what they want. If they do not get it, then they know they did not do the prayer or ritual properly. The fault is with the person for not following the ritual correctly.

This mindset is brought into the church. For example, if people pray to Jesus for healing, they expect healing if they say the right words in the right way. If healing does not happen, they assume either they have not prayed right or done the ritual correctly, or Jesus is not able to deal with this situation. Either way, if they do not get what they want, they will then go to the spirits or ancestors and make their request of them.

Whoever heals is more powerful. And for ATR adherents, it is unimportant to be faithful to one spirit or God. Power and success are paramount. In essence, Jesus is a genie in a bottle to give people their desires. If they do not

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3   R.L. Calvert and David R. Crane, "Mission to Animists," in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations*, ed. Bruce Riley Ashford (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 273-74.

need anything, they put Jesus in bottle until there is a need. But when they call him to service, he needs to grant their request, or they will find another source of power.

Truth Encounter[4]

How should the church approach ATR? First, teaching a wholistic biblical approach like chronological Bible storying is wise. Covering the whole of scripture from Genesis through Revelation is necessary to teach the exclusivity of Jesus. This allows people to grasp the grand narrative of Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and Restoration as seen throughout the Bible.

A gospel presentation which combines the 3 Circles[5] but told using Creation to Christ[6] has been effective. Another popular method is the Two Kingdoms story[7]. Each of these present the complete gospel from Creation to Restoration and show Jesus as the redeemer overcoming our sin.

Discipleship needs to include the truth that our focus should not only be on earth, but on heaven as well. The truth is that God is concerned with our character and how we live. Often, a truth encounter involves showing that man's focus is on power and material things of earth while God is concerned about who we are becoming and what is yet to come. A truth encounter is the first step, but you cannot stop there.

Power Encounter

Since ATR is based on power, often there will need to be a power encounter. Many Western Christians are uncomfortable discussing power and spirits, but for Africans it is a natural subject. Followers of ATR must hear the truth and know that Jesus is more powerful than the spirits and ancestors. Jesus created the spirits and man, and he is able to overcome the evil powers in the world.

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4   Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God: Church Planting among Folk Muslims.* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 2022) 89-195. I have adapted the 3 Encounters from Love's writing.

5   "Three Circles Evangelism Guide - Africa on Mission," Africa on Mission - From Africa to the Ends of the Earth, September 4, 2023, https://africaonmission.org/three-circles-evangelism-guide/.

6   "Creation 2 Christ - Africa on Mission," Africa on Mission - From Africa to the Ends of the Earth, August 12, 2022, https://africaonmission.org/creation-2-christ/.

7   "Two kingdoms - Africa on Mission," Africa on Mission - From Africa to the Ends of the Earth, August 12, 2022, https://africaonmission.org/two-kingdoms/.

Through the Holy Spirit there can be healing from physical sickness and spiritual and demonic powers. He protects us from curses and evil. This must be proclaimed and experienced for people to abandon ATR and follow Christ.

An example of a power encounter might be that a Christian refuses to offer sacrifices to the ancestors. Although others say disaster will strike, the believer puts his faith in Jesus and refuses to compromise his faith. Or, if a believer has been cursed, he prays to Jesus and trusts him to protect him without going to the witchdoctor to get a remedy to counter the curse. The believer stands firm in his faith that Yahweh can and will protect him.

A word of caution is needed at this point. Simply because we ask Jesus to heal someone or show his power in a tangible way does not guarantee healing. Sometimes, he allows us to struggle or experience sickness. This also needs to be taught to disciples of Jesus coming from an ATR background.

Cultural Encounter

After hearing the truth of the gospel and experiencing the power of Jesus, men and women need to examine their culture. In every culture there is good and bad. To see a transformed culture, there must be Christian men and women from inside the culture who are able and willing to examine it. What are the beliefs that can stay? What must go? What can be adapted? The goal is not to make cultures look alike, but for them to be like Christ and to be biblical in their beliefs. Culture transformation takes time but is necessary in the discipleship process.

As people become disciples of Jesus, their worldview will change. They will begin to become like Christ. As they become like Christ, their desires change. Their view of leadership and service, what is morally acceptable or unacceptable, will all be impacted as they are discipled. Each step should see them putting off the old ways and putting on the new as Paul teaches in Colossians 3:1-17.

Often, these changes are met with resistance. People don't want to dishonor ancestors or family. They struggle because their identity is in the culture, and rejection is a real possibility.

Conclusion

Syncretism abounds in Africa because many people have placed their faith in traditional religious practices and not in Jesus. They have added Jesus to their repertoire of spirits and ancestors to gain power and success in life.

A large percentage of Sub-Sahara Africans claim Christianity.[8] However, is it biblical Christianity or a syncretized mixture that attempts to follow both ATR and Jesus simultaneously? Who or what is their faith in? What is their source of authority? Jesus and the Bible or traditions and ancestors? Africa needs men and women who know the truth, love the truth and live obediently to the Bible.

Despite the many challenges the church in Africa faces, there is hope. There are many faithful brothers and sisters in Africa combatting ATR. They have truly counted the cost and are walking with Jesus faithfully.

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8   Conrad Hackett, Marcin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi and Dalia Fahmy, "How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020," Pew Research Center, 2025, https://doi.org/10.58094/fj71-ny11.

The Ancestor's Body and the Body of Christ

Animism, Orality, and the Missionary Task

Nathan Baker

Introduction

The Malagasy church leader bowed his head in shame. The missionaries and Malagasy pastors had discipled him for years, but now he had abandoned the faith. "But why?" they asked. "Did you not understand our teaching?" The old man shook his head. "I know God's Word, and I can see how I need to follow it forward. But I can still hear the voice of my father behind me, calling me back."

While the Western world tends to lodge epistemology in empiricism and objective reasoning, many people around the world adhere to what we will call an embodied epistemology.[1] Like this Malagasy church leaders, people with an embodied epistemology do not trust or identify with information abstracted from study, education, or books, but that knowledge which comes

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1 Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with knowledge, more specifically "epistemology focuses on the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge. It examines the defining ingredients, the sources, and the limits of knowledge." Paul K. Moser, ed., "Introduction" in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

from relating with others. Indeed, missionaries have seen this deeply relational trust firsthand. Lynn Thigpen found through her research working among animists in Cambodia, that they "preferred to learn by means of people instead of print."[2] Even when other avenues of education were available, they trusted what they learned directly from people whose bodies they could see, hear, and touch.

Early anthropologists viewed animists' relationally-driven epistemology as *failed* or underdeveloped, lacking the preference for empiricism and objective evaluation cherished by the West. However, proponents of New Animism, like Nurit Bird-David, insist that animists' "relational (not failed) epistemology"[3] is not inadequate but simply locates the authority for the epistemology not in facts or reasoning but in relationships—in a person, persons, the community, ancestors, and even personified spirits. Graham Harvey, following Bird-David's lead, adds that animists "live through and live out the expression of their own emplaced, located, and embodied reality. They perform who they are and thus come to know who they are—always in relationship to self and others."[4] Animists learn by relating to their ancestors through oral tradition and ritual.

This article contends that animists locate epistemological authority in the body of their ancestor(s), which requires Christians to communicate Christ to them in embodied ways. For this argument, this article will address how ancestors inscribe themselves on others through oral tradition, and then examine a case study from Madagascar. Finally, we will explore how the Bible reveals an embodied person at the center of a Christian's epistemology, who testifies about himself not only through a book but through an embodied community.

Animism and Orality in the Body of the Ancestor

Animism is complex and not monolithic. However, Graham Harvey notes two key features: indigenous religions are in general marked by "almost

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2   Lynn Thigpen, "Deconstructing Oral Learning," in *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement: Expanding the Firm Foundations,* eds. Tom A. Steffen and Cameron D. Armstrong (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2022), 57.

3   Nurit Bird‑David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40.S1 (1999): 69, 71.

4   Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 76.

ubiquitous centrality of elders and ancestors as holders and sharers of tradition."[5] Christian anthropologist Charles Farhadian notes a third binding feature: while World Religions are subject to "standardized scriptures and interpretations," in indigenous [animistic] religions, "The ways knowledge is received and employed are less formalized ... communicated orally from one person to another, or from one group to another group." [6] Orality connects these three features. It is through the oral tradition that elders and ancestors both pass down as well as preserve power. Oral traditions also maintain the ancestral way of life and train others how to guard and cultivate their way of life. Orality connects animists to their ancestors—with the ancestor's body as the primary instrument.

While early anthropologists conflated animism with illiteracy,[7] it is better to understand oral tradition as a kind of writing. Haun Saussy has proffered one of the better formal definitions of orality: "Oral tradition is not the antithesis of writing, but a particular kind of writing, an inscription on other human minds."[8] He describes orality as an embodied technique—lungs, lips, mouth, and teeth working together to inscribe sound on another human body—beating on the eardrum to finally register meaning in the mind. As such, oral tradition differs from writing not so much in technique as in material: human bodies are the transcribing (and thus transmitting) instruments, not pen and paper.[9]

For this reason, oral speech from a human body is the most prized form of animistic information. Hence, literary critic Lee Haring exclaims that for animists accustomed to an oral tradition, "[O]rality is the mark of authenticity."[10] People steeped in oral traditions see authority as particularly embodied in time and space and mistrust information they cannot directly see proceeding

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5   Graham Harvey, *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (London: Cassell, 2000), 12.

6   Charles Farhadian, *Introducing World Religions: A Christian Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 119.

7   Robert Harry Lowie exemplifies this kind of prejudice when he clarifies that anthropologists imply nothing more degrading in the title "primitive" than "peoples of a relatively simple culture; or, to be more specific, the illiterate peoples of the world," *Primitive Religion* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), ix.

8   Haun Saussy, *The Ethnography of Rhythm: Orality and Its Technologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 156.

9   See Chapter 5, "Embodiment and Inscription," in Saussy, *The Ethnography of Rhythm*, pp. 156–171.

10   Lee Haring, "Continual Morphing" *Oral Tradition* 18.1 (2003): 2.

from one's body. Therefore, it is the ancestor, inscribing himself on another body through his own, that connects discussions of orality to the embodied epistemology of animism.

The only way animists can learn right relationships with self, others, and the environment is through the body of the ancestor. They must follow the oral tradition that the ancestor produced from their breath, tongue, teeth, and mouth, imitate the rituals they embodied, and, finally, worship their physical remains. Dutch missiologist J. Herman Bavinck observed that animists regard ancestors as the ultimate authorities—repositories of revelation, mediators of divine presence, and objects of worship.[11] Most animists acknowledge a *de jure* Creator God, but only ancestors, through their oral tradition, can reveal Him; thus, they function as the *de facto* Higher Power. In animistic thought, every epistemological thread converges here: ancestors generate life, inscribe their identity on descendants, and stand as the essential intermediaries between the divine and the community.

Madagascar Case Study

We will examine an embodied epistemology at work in an example of the indigenous religion of Madagascar and with those Malagasy who locate epistemological authority in the oral tradition of their ancestors. Malagasy animists validate what they know and trust through their ancestors—specifically the bodies of their ancestors.

A Malagasy animist's identity is rooted in ancestors and the oral tradition they have passed down. Madagascar's indigenous religion, *fombandrazana*, "the way(s) of the ancestor(s),"[12] centers all spiritual access—whether to the creator God or other spirits—on deceased forebears. Therefore, like the aforementioned Malagasy church leader, many Malagasy consider their ancestors the highest authority.

The most important container of knowledge, power, or spiritual access is the ancestor's body and the knowledge it has passed down. An ancestor's body,

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11   J. H. Bavinck et al., "Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith" in *The J.H. Bavinck Reader*, eds. John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser, trans. James A. De Jong (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 348–49, 379–80.

12   Malagasy has no plural form, leaving this word open to interpretation, depending on usage and context, whether one is referring to multiple ancestors and their ways or just one ancestor and his way.

specifically, is revered in both life and death. For example, certain Malagasy tribes have created euphemisms for every visible body part so that no one pronounces the words feet, eyes, mouth, stomach, etc., to refer to a living male elder.[13] Additionally, Malagasy worship the bodies of departed ancestors. Malagasy conduct elaborate community ceremonies to bury their elders, even returning periodically to the tomb to feed and reclothe the body.[14] Øyvind Dahl has called this ceremony (*famadihana*) a "manifestation" of the *fombandrazana* worldview—a kind of ultimate (physical, concrete) expression of ancestor veneration.[15]

Primary with the ancestor's body is the knowledge he held and transmitted. Every central tenet of the *fombandrazana* has a story or proverb or both behind it.[16] Most tribal taboos tie back directly to an exact event in an ancestor's life. For example, one clan cannot eat tortoises, citing a story of how tortoises protected their ancestors; another cannot eat mutton because their ancestor choked to death on it. The repetition and celebration of these origin stories is a central element of Malagasy culture, as Malagasy are famous as masters of oral art.[17] Significantly, Malagasy do not just transmit knowledge orally; they transmit knowledge from the ancestors as the ancestors transmitted it. As the popular tagline at the end of Malagasy folktales insists, "It's not me who's lying but previous elders."

Malagasy culture channels knowledge through ancestors, regardless of medium. Anthropologist Maurice Bloch (who lived as a researcher in Madagascar for several years) contends that learning to read and write, contrary to expectations, did not at all change the way Malagasy think. He recounts how a respected Malagasy historian, with an illustrious Western education, continued to regurgitate historical fictions that nonetheless supported ancestral

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13 Jørgen Ruud, *Taboo*, 2nd ed. (Tananarive: Trano Printy Loterana, 1970), 15.

14 Ruud, *Taboo*, 161-62; Øyvind Dahl, *Meanings in Madagascar: Cases of Intercultural Communication* (Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1999), pp. 27–28.

15 Dahl, *Meanings in* Madagascar, 27.

16 For example, traditional healers, village tribunals, polygamy, creation, sacrifice of zebu, etc. Cesar Paes et al., eds., *L'Origine des Choses: Récits de la Côte Ouest de Madagascar*, trans. Velonandro (Antananarivo: Foi et justice, 2002).

17 Consider, for example, the work of Lee Haring, *Verbal Arts in Madagascar: Performance in Historical Perspective*, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Lee Haring, *How to Read a Folktale: The Ibonia Epic from Madagascar* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013); Also, Saussy's examination of *hain-teny* in chapter 1 of *The Ethnography* of Rhythm.

oral tradition.[18] Writing gave the Malagasy another tool, but their ancestors still controlled how they used the tool.

Bloch points to the Bible as a prime example. "The fact that it was written and printed was significant," he says, "not because this marked a different kind of knowledge from the oral knowledge of the elders, but because it represented a more powerful, impressive, efficient form of the same kind of knowledge."[19] That is, even as Malagasy could read the translated Bible, their epistemology was still rooted in categories shaped by the *fombandrazana*.

Translating the Bible into Malagasy was indeed a noble feat. But a mere book—even the Bible—cannot unseat the embodied ancestors sitting at the center of the *fombandrazana* epistemology. In this way, the Bible becomes a medium of power. An animist with access to the Bible does not need to understand it, just to pass it on and manipulate it. The Malagasy Queen, who murdered Christians and burned Bibles, still converted her government to written documents and commissioned the transcription of folk tales. Still today, Malagasy witchdoctors cut up strips of the Bible and the Qur'an to use in their charms. Prosperity preaching quotes the Bible to support using water, blood, and cow horns for spiritual cleansing and blessing. They are using the Bible … just like the ancestors taught them.

These foundational elements of the veneration of the ancestor's body and the primacy of the oral tradition he mediated form the foundation for Malagasy epistemology. The Malagasy people implicitly trust those closest to them to embody what is most true. This kind of embodied epistemology is epitomized in the ancestors. The Malagasy proverb bluntly states, "Parents are gods you can see with your eyes."[20] When one presents the gospel to Malagasy, they commonly respond, "Why should I worship your ancestor (Jesus)? I saw my grandfather with my own eyes. And he looks more like me than your Jesus does!" In other words, those whom one saw, touched, heard, and smelled—those with whom one related most closely and spent more time in everyday life—are more trustworthy and worthy of devotion.

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18   Maurice E. F. Bloch, *How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, And Literacy.* (New York: Westview Press, 2008), 154–56.

19   Bloch, *How We Think They* Think, 160.

20   Ruud also reports the proverb *Tsy maintsy hajaina sy homem-boninahitra ny ray aman-dreny satria so-lon-Andriamanitra*, "Parents must be respected and glorified as representatives of God," in Taboo, 21.

Admittedly, most people trust their family more than a stranger. Nevertheless, while animism is not unique in valuing relational trust, it uniquely sacralizes, localizes, and absolutizes relational trust to the exclusion of other ways of being and ways of knowing. Everyone probably trusts their grandfather more than their new immigrant neighbor; only an animist will sift all information through what their grandfather said and treat him as a vessel of divinity.

It is also helpful to remember that animistic religions are classified as such because they have no binding textual tradition to which they adhere. That is, they have no recorded standard by which to compare competing claims. Christian adherents are subject to the Bible, Islamic adherents to the Qur'an, and Secularists to the Scientific Method. Animists, by definition, subject themselves not to a shared text but to people: local authority figures to whom they directly relate.

For example, a secular teen may trust an influencer more than their parent, depending on how persuasive the influencer is to the teen and their peer group. By contrast, the animist teen's parents control their eternal destiny: to disobey one's ancestors is to betray one's past as well as curse one's future. As a biblical example, for a Christian, Jesus' words to let the dead bury their dead demonstrate spiritual allegiance to Jesus; for the animist, this call is blasphemy.

The Gospel and an Embodied Epistemology

The Bible testifies that God revealed himself in Jesus's own embodiment (incarnation) and continues to reveal himself through human bodies who are indwelt with his Spirit, and together form Jesus' own Body, the Church. An animist holding to an embodied epistemology can find in the gospel a compelling call to trust Jesus and his way of living and being.

An embodied epistemology has biblical warrant. John's first letter opens by rooting the assurance of believers' knowledge of Jesus in embodied and relational terms:

What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have observed and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may also have fellowship

with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1–3, CSB, author's italics).

In other words, John affirms that believers' epistemology was not only shaped by but grounded in the fact that they knew Jesus with their bodies (eyes, ears, hands, etc.). Because they had personally related to him, they had the conviction to declare that to others so that they too could have a relationship with God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit's testimony in fellowship with the church.

Of course, this embodied approach to relating to Jesus is not limited to our bodies. John writes in his gospel that Jesus chided Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn 20:29). One does not have to encounter Jesus face to face to believe in him. Nevertheless, the hope, even for those who haven't seen Jesus in person, is the continuity of the Gospel message, transmitted from person to person since the occurrence of a historical and embodied event.[21]

Missiologist Leslie Newbigin emphasized that Jesus did not entrust his mission to a book but to a community.[22] It is "through the church" that God is revealing his "multifaceted wisdom" (Eph 3:10, CSB). That is, God reveals himself to those holding an embodied epistemology through Jesus' incarnation as the Church continues to trust and embody him. As Newbigin again emphasized elsewhere, "[T]he only way in which we can affirm the truth and therefore, the authority of the gospel is by preaching it, by telling the story, and by our corporate living of the story in the life and worship of the Church."[23] The church embodies God's story, revealing Christ through its shared life and proclamation.

Abstracted doctrine never communicates as clearly to an embodied epistemology as oral methods of communication. Nevertheless, the Church's challenge is not merely to replace ancestral stories with biblical ones. The Church must embody the story of Jesus in such a way that the community trusts his presence and authority more than the ancestors.

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21 John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 62.

22 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 80.

23 Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 180-81.

Orality is people inscribing themselves on others with their voice. Therefore, the instrument of communication is the human body. If Jesus is to inscribe himself on others, it will be through his Body—his Church—as an instrument.

Indeed, just as the ancestor inscribes himself on others, so Jesus inscribes himself on his people. Paul prioritized the "Spirit" over "letter(s)" (2 Cor 3:6). He tells the Corinthians they are his evidence of apostolic authority because the "Spirit of the living God" has inscribed himself on their hearts. People and their changed lives fundamentally validate God's authority more than written words. Richard Hays comments that Paul illustrates in this word picture that "incarnation eclipses inscription. By incarnation I mean ... the enfleshment of the message of Jesus Christ in the community of Paul's brothers and sisters at Corinth."[24] Paul saw that the greatest form of inscription, similar to the oral inscription of the ancestors, was Jesus conveying himself through the bodies of his community of people living changed lives.

Therefore, missionaries must prioritize the formation of alternative communities that embody God's Word. To effectively pull away from one's leaders, who are the very embodiments of truth, people must find courage in community.[25] One way churches may do this is by forming story-crafting groups, doing what Paul Hiebert called "metatheology."[26] As groups pray over, meditate, exegete, dramatize, apply, sing, and proclaim God's Word together, they not only grow in communal reflection but in communal courage. For example, churches in Southern Madagascar meet weekly to tell Bible stories to each other. They bring these stories to life: telling them in their community, singing them, enacting them, and citing them as authoritative examples for Christian behavior as they consider the theological and moral questions they face in daily life. Yet instead of walking up to someone with a book (Bible) and reciting what is written, the groups are internalizing and embodying its message. Instead of a single pastor reinforcing his own incontrovertible (ancestor-like) authority, the body of believers lives out an alternative life that

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24 Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 129.

25 Niebuhr surmised that only as a collective body will individuals have the courage and insight to withstand cultural deformation. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 3rd ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 274.

26 Hiebert's vision was for self-theologizing communities applying Scripture to everyday life while personally relating to Jesus as a local community. Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 102.

their Lord has written on their hearts. Their bodies—the collective Body—are the medium. In a group like this, animists can experience both the truth and the trustworthiness of Christ through an embodied community of allegiance. The Body of Christ must replace the ancestor's body in the animist's imagination.

Conclusion

This article has argued that animism and orality are linked in an embodied epistemology centered on the body of the ancestor. As ancestors psychosomatically (orally) inscribe themselves upon successive generations, animists then authenticate knowledge through direct relational experience with trusted figures. As the examples from Madagascar demonstrate, these ancestors are not only physical sources of communal knowledge; animists worship their bodies as mediums of revelation. Thus, the ancestral body lies at the center of their epistemology. Likewise, Christians also have an embodied epistemology. Yet while the animist submits to the authority of their local ancestor, the Christian submits to the authority of the Lord of all who inscribes himself on the collective body of his followers.

For Christian mission, the Church must present the gospel in ways that resonate with existing epistemological patterns. The incarnation of Christ and the Church's continuing witness as his Body are the theological basis for such engagement. The Church's task, therefore, is not solely the transmission of doctrinal content but the cultivation of communities whose shared life and practices credibly embody the authority of Christ. Jesus himself came in the flesh, and he continues to be known through the Spirit in his Body, the Church. Mission among animistic peoples must therefore prioritize forming credible and embodied alternative communities that live out together that Jesus is the only way, the truth, and the life.

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Neo-Pentecostalism and its Intrinsic Animistic Connection

David Allen Bledsoe

- *That church constantly talks about money. Nevertheless, many folks testify that its teachings help them to overcome difficult situations.*

- *Its leadership distributes tangible items to its members and visitors. The pastors assert that the objects provide them with divine blessings and protection from evil.*

- *People pack out the auditorium multiple times a week. The adherents demonstrate a fervor for God.*

- *Although some of its tactics are questionable, the church seems to do more good than harm. Hence, its presence facilitates the gospel cause.*

Anecdotal comments like the ones above are commonplace in global south contexts. The depicted church falls into the classification of Neo-Pentecostal. At a minimum, the ideas of this movement have altered the congregation's discourse and practices to where it appears more Neo-Pentecostal than any of its Pentecostal or historical-evangelical forbears ever dreamt.

Evangelical leaders raise sincere questions about churches that fit into this category. They may ask themselves, "*What are these groups teaching and doing? Have their pastors found the key to church growth that we can imitate? Should my congregation avoid their practices? If so, why? How should our church vet professing believers who come from a Neo-Pentecostal background if they want to join our membership?*"

What to do? Where to start?

Throughout my missionary service of nearly three decades in Brazil, I have observed firsthand the continued growth and proliferation of the Neo-Pentecostal movement, which preceded my arrival.[1] The phenomenon continues to change the evangelical landscape, influencing both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal denominations. The oldest and largest Neo-Pentecostal denomination in Brazil, The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, happens to be the most successful one to extend its global footprint. Its leadership boasts of having affiliated churches "in almost 150 countries throughout the world," which surpasses the geopolitical reach of McDonald's Restaurants.[2]

When I speak with Christian leaders serving in other majority world contexts, they also attest to similar traits and challenges in their respective cultural contexts. Their testimonies confirm what scholars affirm. Neo-Pentecostalism is a global phenomenon.

This article introduces Neo-Pentecostalism so that missionaries or students of missions may start to acquire a better understanding of this global phenomenon. To accomplish this objective, the essay describes Neo-Pentecostalism, identifies its primary traits, addresses concerns with the movement, and highlights its dilemmas for the missionary task[3] related to evangelism, discipleship, healthy formation of churches, and leadership development. The topic consequently ties to this current edition of the *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* given the movement's animistic bent and appeal.[4]

Description And Characteristics

No one denomination or cultural context embodies Neo-Pentecostalism. Hence, groups under the influence of this movement often differ from one another by nuancing their beliefs and practices. Moreover, discourses and

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1   The third period or wave of Pentecostalism in Brazil symbolically began in 1977 when three young Pentecostal pastors started holding services in a former funeral home, located in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God traces its origin to this place. This location and date also mark the advent of the Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal Movement in the popular evangelical imagination.

2   [Igreja] Universal [do Reino de Deus], "Nossa história", *Universal*, n.d., available at: https://www.universal.org/a-universal/nossa-historia/.

3   International Mission Board, *Foundations*, 2nd ed. (Richmond: IMB, 2018), 7, 75-98.

4   Animism is the belief that spiritual beings and forces control human affairs for good and ill. Thus, a person seeks to discern these influences to leverage or counteract them toward his desired outcome.

praxes may vary from one context to another (e.g., Brazil vs. Mexico; South Korea vs. China; Uganda vs. South Africa). Nevertheless, Norwegian theologian Sturla J. Stålsett provides this excellent summary, in light of an examination of its globalized manifestation:

Neo-Pentecostalism is a new form of Pentecostal religion in which spiritual warfare, exorcisms, immediate healings and personal prosperity in this world have replaced traditional Pentecostalism's emphasis on speaking in tongues; on strict, pietistic morals; and on Jesus' second coming and eternal salvation.[5]

Stålsett's definition brings to the surface what 'new wave' or 'third wave'[6] Pentecostalism both emphasizes and lays aside. As a consequence, he implies its three principal traits, which merit elaboration.

First, *the accentuated prosperity-theology message* holds that Christians, through faith, can and should enjoy divine healing, health and success in this lifetime. The atonement of Jesus Christ offers emotional and physical benefits, as well as eternal salvation, to those who believe.[7] This premise stands paramount to the Neo-Pentecostal hermeneutic. While the prosperity-theology message precedes Neo-Pentecostalism, churches associated with the movement serve as the major carrier of this viewpoint among global south nations.

Second, the perspective of *specialized spiritual warfare* sees forces and spiritual entities[8] possess the power to enslave people and thwart their flourishing. Thus, a process of deliverance, often including exorcisms, provides liberation to individuals, even if they are Christ followers, from malignant influences. Afterwards, prescribed methods maintain evil influences at a distance that in turn opens the divine door for progress in this life, as the person grows in

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5   Sturla J. Stålsett, "Introduction: Pentecostalism growth and global transformations", in: Sturla J. Stålsett, ed., *Spirits of Globalization: The growth of Pentecostalism and experiential spiritualities in a global age* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 4.

6   Terms commonly used for Neo-Pentecostalism which distinguishes the movement from the previous two Pentecostal periods.

7   Cf. David W. Jones; Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 69-71; 89-92. Eric W. Kramer, "Possessing Faith: Commodification, Religious Subjectivity, and Collectivity in a Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal Church", doctoral dissertation (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), 187.

8   Depending on the society, spiritual entities may include God, gods, demons, Satan, angels, ancestors, ghosts, jinns, totems and spirits related to nature. Spiritual forces are inanimate powers that may encompass matters such as astrology, witchcraft, evil eye, magic and certain objects.

faith and obedience. The spiritual benefits of keeping maladies at bay and receiving blessings come from churches with these *specialized* ministries that treat difficult and impossible personal and familial situations.

It is important to perceive the *symbiotic relationship*[9] that exists between the accentuated prosperity message with specialized spiritual warfare. Moreover, the fusion of these two traits makes Neo-Pentecostalism appeal to people in fear-based cultures where such phenomena such as the evil eye, ancestor veneration and witchcraft permeate. While these concerns may seem superstitious, missionaries and anthropologists call this thinking and patterns of behaviors animism. To summarize, "the animistic perspective of reality believes that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs."[10] As a result, individuals must "discover which beings and forces are impacting them, in order to ward them off and to employ their power," which leads to achieving desired outcomes.[11]

To offer an analogy, the specialized spiritual warfare trait in Neo-Pentecostalism finds rich soil where folk and traditional religions prevail and shape the worldview of the populations. The accentuated prosperity message, while the most notable Neo-Pentecostal characteristic, functions as fertilizer in societies where the animistic worldview holds a significant sway over the target population.

The last Neo-Pentecostal trait consists of the *elimination or lessening of traditional Pentecostal behavioral norms*, which earlier groups emphasized.[12] While Neo-Pentecostals do not condone a libertine lifestyle, ambitions in this life and progress toward personal goals in this life take a more prominent role to the detriment of preserving one's salvation to the end by complying with the established behavioral norms as set by the ecclesiastical community.[13]

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9   Although this term comes from biology, the analogy fits well to describe the interdependence of these two traits, as one organism depends on the other for survival.

10 Gailyn Van Rheenen, Anthony Parker, *Missions: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Strategies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 313.

11 Ibid.

12 Pentecostal soteriology emphasizes the conformity of a sanctified life on the part of the professing believer to denominational customs and behavioral lifestyle expectations, until his time on earth concludes or the Lord Jesus returns.

13 The practice of speaking in tongues – often accompanying one's salvation/sanctification among Pentecostal forerunners – also seems to take on lesser weight.

Gospel Infractions

Before I continue, I wish to state that I am not Pentecostal or charismatic, nor am I anti-Pentecostal or anti-charismatic. To reiterate, the subject at hand centers on Neo-Pentecostalism that has spread over the last five decades and changed the evangelical landscape in the majority world. While this "new form of Pentecostalism"[14] consists of "continuations" from its Pentecostal precursors, its "discontinuations"[15] cause significant concern and merit scrutiny.

Neo-Pentecostalism indeed poses serious challenges to the missionary task. This section calls attention to four perils that take place when the movement's ideas and practices gain more space in the pulpit and the pews.

1. Overreaching eschatology – In addition to the interpretive challenges of many biblical texts, Neo-Pentecostal proponents overreach by teaching – and often demanding – the effects of heaven on earth in this present age. This raised expectation creates confusion and exaggerated prospects for their hearers. The subjective promises also provoke disappointment when expected hopes never materialize.

The biblical record, no doubt, reveals divine blessings for those who fear God and follow His ways (e.g., Ps 1; 34.8-18). Furthermore, Christians affirm that they are rich through Christ's poverty and suffering (2 Cor 8.9). The Triune God is on mission to reconcile all things to Himself and make all things new (2 Cor 5.17-18; Rev 21.5). Nevertheless, to what extent should the promises of the kingdom and human flourishing be expected in this present age replete with plagues, wars, injustices and natural calamities?

Disciples of Christ indeed experience God's blessings because of His favor, their obedience, and other means of grace, which the Spirit ministers to believers in the context of covenant community. That being stated, the full effects are to come when He recreates a new heaven and earth (Rev 21). Until

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14   Sturla J. Stålsett, "Introduction: Pentecostalism growth and global transformations", in: Sturla J. Stålsett, ed., *Spirits of* Globalization, 4.

15   Cf. Paulo Ayers Mattos, "An Introduction to the Theology of Bishop Edir Macedo (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God): A Case Study of a New Brazilian Pentecostal Church", unpublished master thesis, Indianapolis: Christian Theological Seminary, 2002, 1, 107. Mattos' use of continuations and discontinuations centers on Macedo's theological perspectives, and, thus, the denomination that he founded. Nevertheless, the terminology fits well for assessing Neo-Pentecostalism.

then and with sin's manifold presence in and around believers and satanic forces against them, the redeemed await the full culmination of God's kingdom on earth.

2. A poor understanding of human suffering – The overreaching eschatology frequently ties to Neo-Pentecostalism's simplistic and deficient view of theodicy. To summarize, why do humans, and even Christ's disciples, suffer?

The Scriptures reveal that evil ties back to the fall when Satan was present and active in Eden. Furthermore, the enemy still provokes temptation and causes suffering; thus, vigilance and prayer are mandated necessities (1 Pet 5.6-9). Satan rightly holds the title of the father of all lies and murderer. He blinds people to the gospel (Jn 8.44; 2 Cor 4.4) and thwarts the plans of missionaries and delays angels' intentions (e.g., 1 Thes 2.18; Dan 10.11-12).

However, a biblical survey on theodicy shows other reasons for tribulations, besides or in addition to demonic activity. Some causes come from man's own rebellion and the sins of others – in the present and times past (e.g., slavery, fathers' examples, heresy, prejudice). Moreover, the Scriptures attribute suffering and hardship, especially among believers, to God himself and His purposes which He intends for the good of the elect and the accomplishment of His eternal plan (e.g., Rom 8.28-30; 2 Cor 4.7-12; Jas 1; Heb 12; 1 Pet 4.12-19).

The tendency to attribute every personal and familial hardship to Satan or another demonic entity oversimplifies the predicament of human misery. The one-dimensional assessment consequently leads to viewing evil more as a contagion which to avoid. This matter once again brings up the subject of animism.

3. An unredeemed worldview – The gospel, once heard, comprehended and received, goes about redeeming a person's perspective on life, including one's view of self and the spiritual realm. However, the Neo-Pentecostal narrative and praxis subjugate its adherents to subjective, self-induced motivations and animism.

Not all reasons for receiving divine assistance in Neo-Pentecostal environments and mediumistic religions size up as impure (e.g., resources for medicines to aid a sick child; desire for a spouse to return; acquisition of a needed job to provide the needs of one's family; cure of a continuous ailment). On the other hand, the constant pointing to a malignant spiritual being or witchcraft provoked by a neighbor, the handing out of spiritually charged

objects, and the prescribing of specific rituals smack of paganism or syncretistic religions. These tactics fall short of a biblical worldview and ethic that come from the faithful preaching of the gospel.

While Neo-Pentecostalism may seem to resolve the "the excluded middle" regarding the spiritual realm,[16] its proponents err on the polar-opposite side making it "an expanded middle" in which their focus is Satan and demons and not God and the gospel.[17] As such, churches within the movement teach and propagate a mutated form of evangelical animism. What's more, the groups relegate the gospel to a lesser issue or, at worse, present a distorted gospel, as the next dilemma notes.

4. A troublesome soteriology – Neo-Pentecostalism's emphasis on the accentuated prosperity theology message and its fusion with the alleviation of demonic-induced misery in reality leads to another gospel (cf. Gal 1.6-9). While I recognize that to some this may sound judgmental and harsh, this section offers a justification for my readers' critical reflection.

Without a doubt, Neo-Pentecostal pastors and their literature tirelessly speak of faith. They sometimes refer to "trusting in Jesus as your Savior." However, when dealing with how to acquire eternal salvation (i.e., eternal life, justification of sin, coming into the kingdom), explanations on the ground are ambiguous at best but often redefined by the fusion of the prosperity-theology message with the specialized spiritual-warfare strategies.

What a person must accomplish to receive alleviation from evil, individual progress and/or protection in this life determines Neo-Pentecostal soteriology. As a result, faith in the minds of adherents practically equates to sacrifice, which implies human effort, a system of prescribed rituals and the giving of tithes and offerings. In this manner, Neo-Pentecostalism presents the characteristic of a cult in that the discourse replaces the New Testament teaching of how one acquires salvation through repentance in the Lord Jesus and faith in His merits alone.

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16   Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, Jan. 1982, 43. Hiebert pointed out to western missionaries their tendency to omit the spiritual realm when taking the gospel message to their target people. He exhorted them to take seriously their own understanding of this neglected second dimension of the unseen world if they aim to articulate the claims of Christ in such a way that answers the questions and daily concerns of populations who understand spirits as playing as an integral part of their everyday affairs.

17   Scott A. Moreau, "Syncretism", *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Scott A. Moreau, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 363.

Personal conversations with an untold number of Neo-Pentecostals in the Brazilian context confirm the above appraisal. When queried about their basis for their salvation, sympathizers almost never mention the name of Jesus. This soteriological quandary also raises two pertinent questions. How can one be saved without Jesus? How can a church be evangelical if it fails to faithfully preach the message of Jesus to its hearers and explain how to receive the gospel which God offers and reveals in His Word?

Applications and Assessments for the Missionary Task

Missionaries and national pastors alike must make gospel-based judgments as to who belongs to the evangelical mission force, who belongs to the mission field and who are enemies to the Christian mission advance. The Great Commission cause does not permit neutrality.

Assessments should start with evaluating churches and denominations in their respective cultural contexts. In this realm, gospel-committed believers would benefit to learn from their historic Protestant forebears who often spoke of the biblical marks of the true church.[18] Among the New Testament signs, two stand out as prominent from which the others derive. These marks center on the faithful preaching of the Word, including the correct articulation of the gospel of Christ and its implications for being a disciple,[19] and the correct administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper.[20]

To illustrate the applicability of the biblical marks of a church, John Calvin instructed that "we need real discernment" to "not be misled by the name 'Church.'"[21] If a band of professed believers makes this claim, he insisted that

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18 Certain Protestant confessions of faith and clarifying documents (e.g., church manuals) highlight the biblical marks as identified in this section. Certain ones also include church discipline as the third mark. Whether two, three or more marks, these articulations demonstrate a common way of thinking that arose among Protestants to discern true churches from false churches (which adulterate the message of Christ and stand against the cross (Gal 1.9; Phil 3.18). See: "The Belgic Confession" [1561], §29; "The Second Helvetic Confession" [1566], §17; "The 'Orthodox Creed' [of General Baptists of the Midlands, 1678]", §30; Benjamin Keach, *The Glory of a True Church* [1697] (Pensacola: Chapel Library, 2018), p. 4; R. C. Sproul, *What is the Church* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2019).

19 International Mission Board, Foundations, 47-58.

20 As a complement, see the definition of a local church and "the twelve characteristics of a healthy church," as affirmed by the International Mission Board's staff and missionary personnel. Ibid., 59-64.

21 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Tony Lane; Hilary Osborne, eds. (Grand Rapids:

the group "must be put to the test" to ensure the faithful preaching of the Word of God and celebration of the ordinances, according to the institution of Christ.[22] If it fails to show these two New Testament signs, Calvin warned that "we must avoid such a sham." [23]

In light of the previous section, Neo-Pentecostalism results in one of two dismal situations regarding the two primary marks of a true church and, consequently, the missionary task. As Neo-Pentecostal teachings and practices gain a foothold in the pulpit and in the hearts of its hearers, either the group has fallen into the category of a false church or is moving in that tenuous direction.[24] The first scenario requires denouncing the congregation and protecting believers and non-believers alike from its malignant teachings.[25] The second situation necessitates biblical instruction and warning to leaders and congregants alike so they can make course corrections before it is too late.[26] The biblical duty of admonishing especially pertains to an association of churches in which the memberships care about the well-being of others and hold to a common confession, which, in turn, permits their continued and responsible cooperation.[27]

Baker Academic, 1986), book 4, chap. 1, §11.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 For an excellent explanation on the purity spectrum that delineates true churches from false churches, see chapter 45 of: Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 1072ff.

25 Seventeenth-century Baptists agreed with their Protestant pedobaptist counterparts that no church was perfect. They affirmed: "The purest churches under heaven are subject to mixture and error". However, they also understood there was a line in which a church becomes an enemy to the cause of Christ and association with that group would be impossible. "Some [churches] have degenerated so much that they have ceased to be churches of Christ and have become synagogues of Satan." *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith: in Modern English*, Stan Reeves, ed. (Cape Coral: Founders Press, 2017), chap. 26, §3.

26 The late IMB missionary Randy Arnett provided an exemplary attempt to help Baptist churches in Sub-Saharan African contexts comprehend the subtleties of Neo-Pentecostalism and respond appropriately. Randy Arnett, *Pentecostalization: The Evolution of Baptists in Africa* (Eldon, Missouri: self-published, 2017).

27 "And altho' there may be many errors in such a visible church, or congregations, they being not infallible, yet those errors being not fundamental, and the church in the major, or governing part, being not guilty, she is not thereby unchurched; nevertheless she ought to detect those errors, and to reform, according to God's holy word." "The 'Orthodox Creed' [of General Baptists of the Midlands, 1678]", §30.

Moreover, the biblical record orientates believers to distinguish the deceived from the deceivers. This apostolic posture helps the pastor and fellow church members to extend compassion and practice patient evangelism to the victims while denouncing false teachers who mislead their subjects and confound the gospel of Christ (Mat 7.15; 9.36; 2 Cor 5.14-20).

In conclusion, evangelism, discipleship, healthy church formation and leadership development (four of the six components of the missionary task) require a biblical understanding of the gospel and the church and the deliberate preservation of both. Sadly, Neo-Pentecostalism, along with its animistic propensities, poses as a significant, contemporary threat to the missionary task due to the gospel infractions committed by its proponents. Recovering the historic Protestant paradigm of the biblical marks of true churches can help missionaries and their national partners make needed assessments of Christian-based groups around them and their own churches. As a result, they will be more equipped to serve those they evangelize and disciple.

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28   The revised 1619 edition is entitled "The Confession of Faith of the Reformed Church".

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Animism, the Prosperity Gospel, and the American Dream

Introduction

The first time I ever stepped foot into the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey, I noticed the layers of history that were quite literally etched into these ancient walls. The newer Islamic art –whether geometric, calligraphic, and vegetal – was on the surface of the walls. However, in some places around this grand edifice, you could see ancient Christian iconography peeking out from behind some of the crumbling plaster. I have not been in that building in over fifteen years, but the images of a thin veneer covering something more foundational have stuck with me.

Similarly, mainstream religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity are often a thin veneer over folk religions that shape the day-to-day lives of religious practitioners. Whether it is folk Islam, folk Buddhism, or even folk Christianity, much has been written about how folk religions dominate the lives of everyday people all around the world. In fact, conversations around folk religions are often concerned with eliminating the idea that religion can or should be compartmentalized like Western cultures attempt to do.[1] Robin Hadaway, Senior Professor of Missions at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has helpfully shown that folk Islam *is* the "real" Islam for the vast majority of self-professed Muslims around the world.[2] In fact, folk religion in Muslim contexts is the driving force behind how people think, the way they

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1   For example, see Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

2   Robin Dale Haddaway, *The Muslim Majority: Folk Islam and the Seventy Percent* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021).

feel, and the actions they take in their day-to-day lives. Just as Islam thinly covers animistic worldviews dominated by fear and power across much of Africa and Asia, the language of Christian theology and even ethics often just barely covers the underlying worldview of the so-called American Dream that characterizes many citizens of the United States.

For instance, in African contexts where African Traditional Religion (ATR) is the dominant worldview, the Prosperity Gospel (PG) only barely covers an underlying worldview of fear, power, spirit, and animism.[3] Meanwhile, in the USA, what sometimes passes for Christianity is a thin covering over a worldview of a culture often referred to as the American Dream. This type of folk religion, like the PG in Africa, is not the gospel and has no power to save individuals nor to transform cultures. Instead of being a message of hope and deliverance, the PG, whether it is found in African villages or the American suburbs, is a message of moral rot and damning and destructive lies donning gospel garments over demonic deception.

The American Dream in the USA

As referenced above, former IMB missionary and current SBC pastor Nick Moore has shown that the PG is a thin veil over animism in many places in Sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile in North America, the PG is a thin veil over Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD), which Al Mohler calls "the New American Religion."[4] Three points of connection between the American Dream and MTD are an emphasis on personal achievement, a prioritization of individualized happiness, and a push for self-fulfillment. These three values stand in contrast to biblical Christianity which calls Christians to service of others (Gal 5:13), sacrifice of one's own rights (1 Cor 9:22), and loving one's neighbor (Mark 12:31).

First coined by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers,*[5]

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3   Nick Moore, "Africa, Animism, and the Dangers of the Prosperity Gospel," International Mission Board [online]; 26 October 2018; accessed 19 May 2025; available from https://www.imb.org/2018/10/26/africa-animism-prosperity-gospel.

4   Albert Mohler, "Moral Therapeutic Deism – the New American Religion," Albert Mohler [online]; accessed 11 July 2025; available from https://albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2

5   Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2005).

MTD describes a set of beliefs commonly held by American teenagers but increasingly connected to American culture. Some of the core beliefs of MTD are centered around virtue-ladened words like "good," "nice," and "fair." Interestingly, MTD has no basis on which to define, demarcate, or delimit any of these virtues, values, and ideals. Instead, they simply borrow Christian capital and assume that society as a whole knows what they mean when they use these words.

The Prosperity Gospel and the American Dream

Words like religion, culture, and worldview are notoriously difficult to define precisely. All definitions of these core concepts are inevitably colored by the culture from which the definitions arose. This same difficulty in providing a sharp and succinct definition to a key idea applies to defining the PG. Sean DeMars and Mike McKinley have written that it is easier to list the key elements of the PG than it is to provide a clear, concise, and comprehensive definition of it. DeMars and McKinley list several key elements, and at the core of these various principles is the notion that Christian believers should prosper materially in *this* life by claiming and using the power and authority of God to which they have access.[6] With the elements listed by McKinley and DeMars as a foundation, I believe that Malawian pastor Maxwell B. Chiwoko has provided us with a clear and concise description, if not a comprehensive definition, of the PG when he writes that the PG is "the presentation of the message of the Bible that emphasizes . . . the material well-being of believers as *normal* Christian living."[7] Chiwoko emphasizes that the PG teaches that *all* Christian believers can and should prosper financially, emotionally, and physically as a result of believing in the power of finished work of Jesus.

To justify these kinds of mistaken assertions, PG peddlers twist Scripture. The twisting of Scripture for one's own purpose has been a hallmark of false teachers from the beginning of time – all the way back to the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Jude 13 says that false teachers "are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shameful deeds; wandering stars for whom the blackness of darkness is reserved forever" (CSB). As Costi Hinn has written, the twisting of Scripture is not a small thing to be taken lightly or dismissed as a mere in-

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6   Sean DeMars and Mike McKinley, *Health, Wealth, and the (Real) Gospel: The Prosperity Gospel Meets the Truths of Scripture* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Ltd, 2022), 18.

7   Maxwell B. Chiwoko, *On the Problems of Prosperity Gospel Teaching* (Lilongwe, Malawi: Pan African Publisher Ltd, 2018), 21, emphasis mine.

terpretive difference. In fact, writes Hinn, "You could even go as far as saying that the hottest part of hell is reserved for those who twist the name of Jesus Christ and lead people there. Not one will get away with it."[8]

While the Lord calls, sustains, and loves all His people in all places throughout all time, the books of the Bible were written to different audiences for different purposes. The Bible was not originally written to white middle-class Americans who are "seeking wisdom" about whether to build a bigger house, buy a nicer car, or take a European or Caribbean cruise. The Bible was written to God's people who lived at various stages of God's unfolding revelation in salvation history. We find the meaning of a given Scriptural text by seeking to understand that original context and not by waiting for a "new word" for today. Christians can and should seek to find valid implications for their own cultural contexts, and individual Christians should seek to apply those implications to their personal lives by seeking to understand its significance. However, none of these hermeneutical moves should be leveraged in such a way as to twist the original meaning into an implication or application that does violence to the overall message of Scripture, which is centered on Jesus as both the foundation and the ultimate purpose of the Bible.

The more obviously identifiable versions of the PG are easy to spot. When a Rolex-wearing, hair-sprayed, toothy, leathery charlatan stands up and declares that "sowing a seed" of faith – that is just a financial donation to his "ministry" – will result in a "blessing" for your life, most American Evangelicals can call that spade a spade. However, American Evangelicals live in the richest and most prosperous society in the history of the world. As a result, they have come to expect a certain amount of comfort in their daily lives. Comforts like indoor plumbing, reliable electricity, and the ability to heat and cool one's home are not viewed as comforts by most in American. These technologies instead are simply given realities and even claimed as rights. This same expectation for comfort extends to access to not just medical care but top-notch medical care. In general, American Evangelicals have come to see physical and mental well-being as not a blessing but an expectation – or at least something that their wealth can manage and control. Many Ameri-

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8   Costi Hinn, *God, Greed, and the (Prosperity) Gospel: How Truth Overwhelms a Life Built on Lies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 178-9. Costi is the nephew of the infamous Benny Hinn. He formerly worked for his uncle but now rejects his uncle's message and methods.

cans have forgotten the fundamental reality that as created and fallen beings, humans are "dependent, frail, and fragile."[9]

As a result of having these non-biblical expectations, less obvious versions of the PG have also slithered their way into Evangelical churches in North America. Following Kate Bowler's categories of "soft" and "hard" PGs in her helpful book *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, David Schrock has warned against the "softer" form of the PG that is found in some American Evangelical churches. This softer version of the PG short-circuits the biblical idea of true blessing as knowing God as He truly is. Instead, the softer version of the PG delivers a message that is satisfied with the gifts that God gives instead of knowing God as He is.[10] Various versions of the PG can make their way into our churches through books, music, and/or online sermons. However, this softer version of the PG is already present in the minds and hearts of many American Evangelicals. Whenever a churchgoer is more concerned about the gifts he or she receives from God rather than the glory of God being made manifest in his or her daily life, the PG is making its way into that person's heart and mind. In fact, whenever we quote Bible verses out of their textual, canonical, and salvation historical context and attempts to make the message of the Bible all about us, we have bought more into the PG than we want to admit.

The Lord, in his kindness, strips away the idols that prop up the PG in the eyes of those who have eyes to see. When a young American couple raised in church by parents who have been discipled by the American Dream and MTD instead of the Bible buy their first house in their twenties with the money they are making from their lucrative careers and then face a tragic miscarriage, all that they believed about God comes crashing down around them. They may say, "Doesn't God want us to be happy? Is God good if He doesn't give us a healthy child? This is not the Christianity that I signed up for." Now, they have a decision to make. Are they going to embrace this Jesus who walked through suffering and told them to take up the cross daily and follow him (Mat 16:24)? Or are they going to abandon the One whom they feel like abandoned them? This reality comes to light when one sees how the façade of "faith and blessing" is burned up and the raw truth of the gospel

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9   Bob Cutillo, *Pursuing Health in an Anxious Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2016), 55.

10   David Schrock, "A Softer Prosperity Gospel: More Common Than You Think" 9 Marks [online]; 14 January 2014; accessed 14 May 2025; available from https://www.9marks.org/article/journalsofter-prosperity-gospel-more-common-you-think/.

of God's sustaining love is all that those whom the Lord loves can cling to.

Picture a young family who instead of buying their dream home in the comfortable suburbs joyfully volunteers to join a church plant in a community marked by hopelessness and despair. Soon, they discover that rather than hearing prayer requests about which cruise to take, they are hearing a woman ask for prayer to live faithfully with her emotionally abusive husband. Another family's baby comes out of the nursery with bite marks from the special needs child in the nursery. Yet another family is challenged by one of their pastors to consider uprooting their comfortable lives to move to a place they cannot pronounce where no one has ever heard the name of Jesus or seen a Bible. "Aren't I supposed to leave church feeling loved, cared for, and blessed? This is not comfortable anymore." In God's kindness and grace, rather than being frustrated by the vanity of life under the Sun that Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes, families like these find a deep and abiding joy in sacrificial living. As Luther taught us, a life that honors Christ comes through living out a theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory.

The American Dream and "Christianity" are often so intertwined in the minds, hearts, and lives of some American Evangelicals that pulling them apart can be quite painful for everyone involved, but the Lord is more concerned with our holiness than our comfort. This agonizing and arduous work can and should be done by God's people in the power of His Spirit.

Conclusion

God has created us as thinking beings, and He is honored when we think deep thoughts and pursue intricate lines of thinking. However, the reason that we study world religions, cultures, and worldviews is not primarily because it is intellectually stimulating to do so. The reason that we study other worldviews – including animism – is so that we can understand the ways of life and patterns of thinking that individuals and groups are hiding behind. Animism *qua* animism is not the enemy. The PG is not the enemy. The American Dream and MTD are not the enemy. The individuals who, at various levels, have adopted various aspects of these worldviews are not the enemy. According to the New Testament, the true enemies are sin (1 Pet 2:11), Satan (Luke 10:19), and death (1 Cor 15:26), and Christ has conquered these things. May we be found faithful to put on the full armor of God and run with

the gospel of peace into places and to people who are in desperate need of it (Eph 6:12-20).

As Moore said about the problem of the PG and Animism in Africa, the solution to the PG and the American Dream is not theological innovation or even a new way of doing missions. Instead, the solution to the problem of the soft PG in North America is "the way of the cross and the empty tomb."[11]

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11   Moore, "Africa, Animism."

Communicating Biblical Truth to the Nations Without Compromise

Introducing the Archer Framework for Biblical Contextualization

Dr. Cory Gonyo

Introduction

The ever-present problem with cross-cultural mission work involves the tension present when communicating God's unchanging biblical truth with fluid and varying cultures or worldviews of the nations. Varying cultural meanings incongruous with God's truth are ubiquitous among the peoples of the world. Disparate worldviews tend to create a moving target of ever-changing cultures, expressions, terminologies, and ideas. In a word, cultures and worldviews are not only different, but fluid. Regardless of such cultural variations, biblical Christian missionaries must remain true to God's unchanging revelation when communicating God's truth in the process of making "disciples of all the nations," and "teaching them to observe all" that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:18–20 NASB).

This article offers a solution to this problem, maintaining Christian Scripture as the control throughout the process of cross-cultural missionary communication.[1] Because the meaning of God's unchanging truth is resident within the text of Scripture, missionary communication must ensure no loss in original biblical meaning when missionaries communicate cross-culturally.[2] The author refers to this concept as *biblical contextualization*. Biblical contextualization utilizing the principles illustrated via the Archer Framework (introduced below) will ensure that we are communicating biblical truth to the nations without compromising that truth.

The Problem: Unbiblical Contextualization

Biblical contextualization aims at more than mere acceptance of our message or varying cultural expressions of Christian practices. We must take great care that we contextualize for understanding of God's truth, not simply contextualize for mere acceptance, relevance, or behavior.

When attempting to be culturally sensitive, we may fall into one of two errors. The first error occurs when one thinks it necessary to alter God's truth from its original meaning in an effort to make it more acceptable or more relevant to a culture's worldview. Such a practice amounts to the error of corrupting God's truth, invites syncretism, and is clearly unacceptable for those who hold to the infallibility and inerrancy of Christian Scripture.

The second error occurs when one attempts to entice people in another culture to accept something they may not fully understand (e.g., when Judson used the word for "crime" in his translation for "sin" in the Bible).[3] Engag-

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1   See D. A. Carson, ed., *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1987), 220. Carson divides contextualization into two approaches that are distinct in their core philosophy and methodology. Carson explains, "Broadly speaking there are two brands of contextualization. The first assigns *control* to the context; the operative term is praxis, which serves as a controlling grid to determine the meaning of Scripture. The second assigns the *control* to Scripture, but cherishes the 'contextualization' rubric because it reminds us the Bible must be thought about, translated into and preached in categories relevant to the particular cultural context" (emphasis added).

2   For a treatment emphasizing authorial intent see, William Patrick Brooks, "Critiquing Ethnohermeneutics Theories: A Call For An Author-Oriented Approach To Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011).

3   Cory Gonyo, "Establishing Principles for Biblical Contextualization With Specific Application in Theravada and Folk Buddhism of Southeast Asia," (PhD diss., Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022), 139–140. "For example, in one Southeast Asian Buddhist culture, the Christian word for 'sin' has been translated for two hundred years with the *emic* meaning of 'crime.' Therefore, when

ing people this way amounts to unethical manipulation, an attempt to get people to commit or act without their sincere understanding of the biblical reasons that might lead to such action. Such a practice may produce outward behavior but fall short of saving faith.

Falling off the road into either ditch is unacceptable. Neither of the errors described above glorifies the God of the Bible. Both errors would rise to the level of unethical engagement or manipulation in missionary communication. The first manipulates and violates the Word of God itself. The second manipulates and violates the people with whom we are attempting to share the Word of God and the saving gospel.

If the missionary over-contextualizes, syncretism may result. Syncretism is the illegitimate blending of true elements of biblical truth with non-Christian religious elements of the target culture.[4] This results in compromised teachings which may seem comfortable to the receiving culture, but which no longer remain true to the teachings of Scripture. Paul Hiebert writes,

Are there no limits, then, to contextualization? This is probably the wrong way to ask the question. The question is not how far we can go in contextualizing Christianity while still remaining Christian. Rather, our concern is how we can become more truly Christian while making the call of the gospel more clear and appealing to those in our cultural context...The message of the gospel must not only be expressed in the categories and world view of the

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people are asked if they have sinned, they always reply 'no.' Nevertheless, 'crime' is the word used for 'sin' in their translation of Scripture. Thus, when a missionary is talking about sin in this culture, it would be an error for him to force all of the hearers to admit that they are all guilty of crimes. Rather, the missionary must take great care in clarifying that this sin before God is a spiritual and eternal reality and goes far beyond earthly crime. The missionary must take time to clarify, define, and otherwise explain what Scripture means by the word 'sin.' Sin is biblically defined in relation to the Creator God (Rom 3:23; and Creator God is another concept Buddhists do not accept). They also do not have a Creator-Savior God in this Buddhist culture. Thus, the missionary must be careful not to presume that the use of the word for 'sin' is actually understood by his hearers until he has given it its biblical definition in relation to the holy, eternal, God."

4   See Gailyn Van Rheenen, ed., *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006). See also the warning by Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 285. He writes, "One great danger the church faces is equating itself with an ethnic community or culture. The result is cultural Christianity. This leads to a loss of the universal nature of the gospel and of a mission passion to reach the ends of the world. A second danger is that of wedding itself to nation-states and thereby becoming a civil religion. It is the danger of believing that one country is more blessed by God than others, that one nation is at the forefront of advancing his kingdom on earth. This has been one of the great failures of the church throughout history."

local culture, it must also fill them with biblical substance and so revolutionize them [emphasis added].[5]

The danger on the other end of the spectrum is under-contextualization. This occurs when the non-Christian audience does not truly understand what is being communicated. Under-contextualization fails to take seriously the cultural, historical, religious, and worldview differences between peoples. We may be communicating that which is true, but in ways that do not actually transfer that truth into the context of the receiver. Under-contextualization does not allow for the hearers to correctly understand the communication so that they may repent and believe because the concepts remain indistinguishable, unclear, or foreign.

We can achieve biblical contextualization if we apply our biblical convictions to our mission methodology, i.e., if we submit our methods and strategies to the authority, scrutiny, and control of Scripture, something David Hesselgrave called for in 2007.[6] In line with biblical theology, we need to further develop the discipline of biblical contextualization.[7] Biblical contextualization needs to include principles that guide us in faithful biblical teaching of the nations, while simultaneously guarding against over-contextualization and under-contextualization. The treatment herein is a call to remain faithful to the truth of Scripture in any and every context by utilizing a set of principles represented by the Archer Framework.

5　Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 214–215.

6　See David J. Hesselgrave, "Will We Correct The Edinburgh Error? Future Mission in Historical Perspective," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 49, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 121–149. See also Zane Pratt, "Being Serious About the Gospel," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism* 1, no. 1 (2012): 6–11. Note Pratt, page 11, after he outlines our need for seriousness concerning the content, implications, urgency, and spread of the gospel, he writes, "Those who are serious about the gospel must submit their methods and strategies to the scrutiny and control of the Word of God, recognizing that God cares deeply about how we do what he calls us to do, and that he has not left us in the hands of secular marketing or the social sciences to figure out our strategies. His Word is sufficient for the how as well as the what."

7　For examples of biblical theology applied to missions see Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson, eds., *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). See also, Daniel J. Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson, no. 14 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, ed. D. A. Carson, no. 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

A Solution: Biblical Contextualization Employing the Archer Framework

God's eternal truth in Scripture is supra-cultural and therefore inherently and eternally relevant for every nation, tribe, and tongue.[8] God's truth, which is *for* every nation, tribe, and tongue, must likewise be communicated in a way that is intelligible *in* every nation, tribe, and tongue (Matt 28:18–20; Luke 24:45–47; Rev 7:9). Therefore, the supra-cultural and unchanging truth of God's Word must be expressed in the varying cultures, languages, and worldviews without any loss of its original meaning.[9]

We need a model for biblical contextualization that upholds Scripture as the control in all Christian communication. Such a model will remain faithful to God's meaning resident in the biblical text while being sensitive to *emic* meanings in receptor cultures and worldviews. Gailyn Van Rheenen helpfully defines the two vantage points of cultural perception: 1) the *emic* perspective which views culture from the inside, and 2) the *etic* perspective which

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8   See Malcolm B. Yarnell III, "Shall We 'Build Bridges' or 'Pull Down Strongholds?,'" *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 49, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 217. Yarnell writes, "To speak of 'enabling' the gospel or of 'making' it 'relevant' appears to imply a low view of Scripture. It appears to assume either that grace actually resides in us rather than in Scripture, or in the culture rather than in Scripture... God's Word enables us to preach His Word; God's Spirit enables the hearer to believe His Word. Let us humbly admit that relevancy is determined by God's Word and not by man's culture, nor by the preacher. Our focus, therefore, should be upon translating the Word for proclamation and not upon trying to make it culturally relevant." See also Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 21. Fee and Stuart write, "Because the Bible is *God's Word*, it has *eternal relevance*; it speaks to all humankind, in every age and in every culture. Because it is God's Word, we must listen - and obey. But because God chose to speak his Word through *human words in history*, every book in the Bible also has *historical particularity*; each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written (and in some cases also by the oral history it had before it was written down). Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the 'tension' that exists between its *eternal relevance* and its *historical particularity*" (italics original).

9   Robin Dale Hadaway, *A Survey of World Missions* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 159. Hadaway defines Christian contextualization as, "the correct application of biblical truth using insights from a society's culture and worldview in order to communicate the unchanging gospel to a constantly changing world." See also, Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 53. Hiebert reminds us, "The gospel must be distinguished from all human cultures. It is divine revelation, not human speculation. Since it belongs to no one culture, it can be adequately expressed in all of them." David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2000), 128–129. Hesselgrave and Rommen rightly recognize that contextualization, "involves understanding a message revealed by God in Holy Scripture and respondents who have an inadequate or distorted understanding of God's revelation," concluding, "To be valid and authentic Christian contextualization must conform to the kind of revelation God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and the Bible writers claim for the written Word."

views culture from the outside.[10] Therefore, we may speak of the scriptural meaning (derived through grammatical-historical hermeneutics) and a contextualized meaning (derived through *emic* understanding of a culture's worldview) without creating a dichotomy.[11] The biblical contextualization model must maintain the unchanging scriptural meaning of words and doctrines when missionaries communicate into the *emic* understandings of various cultures and languages.

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10 See Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1991), 81. Van Rheenen writes, "There are two vantage points from which culture can be perceived: the emic and the etic (Pike 1971, 37–38). The emic perspective views culture from the inside. The etic, on the other hand, is the outsider's view of culture. Kuhn's model of paradigms is solely concerned with emic perspectives because he assumes that all paradigms are derived from within the culture. There are no supracultural sources of meaning beyond one's own culture. This approach leaves little room for a God who is transcendent to culture, the biblical message which was given outside of the culture, and the cross-cultural communicator who is an external source of paradigms." See also page 91, where Van Rheenen writes, "Christian missionaries minister most effectively when they are able to perceive cultures from a metacultural perspective. They emphatically stand above both their own culture and their host culture but operate within the paradigms of both cultures. Yet truth is not relative, based on a subjective search for truth within human cultural systems. Truth is of God, who has communicated to us in his Son. The missionary communicates the Christian worldview in culture paradigms understandable to each culture. To be effective, he participates from an emic perspective in human cultures and at the same time maintains an etic perception of reality beyond the confines of any cultural system."

11 Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 332–333. Osborne writes, "The key to contextualization is to seek a true fusion of the horizons of both the biblical text and the modern situation. This involves primarily a fusion of contexts, that behind the ancient text and that faced in the current context . . . I will switch from the original language and receptor language to original context (OC) and receptor context (RC) . . . There are two aspects of biblical (original) context, the sociocultural situation behind the passage (discovered via background research) and the literary context that contains the passage (discovered via exegetical research). [What this author refers to as the grammatical-historical hermeneutic.] Both are essential. The cultural context determines the sphere of modern life addressed by the passage; the literary context determines the message addressed to the modern context. *The interpreter must seek a consistent and significant overlap between the original and receptor contexts before true contextualization can occur.* Failure at either level will result in an improper, if not false, contextualization that can have serious consequences. At the missiological level it will produce a syncretized religion that is only half Christian (called"christopaganism"), similar to that produced at Colossae or Ephesus (see Colossians, the Pastoral Epistles or 1 John) . . . Good contextualization is just as important as good exegesis in hermeneutics, since interpretation includes praxis as well as theoria. If the proper task of translation and exegesis is to ask how the original author would say it (that is, the truth presented in the passage) if he were speaking to my audience, the task of contextualization is to determine "how what was asked of the original audience (what the author asked them to do) can be relived by my audience" (brackets and emphasis added). See also Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 17. They write, "On this one thing, however, there must surely be agreement. *A text cannot mean what it never meant.* Or to put that in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken. This is the starting point" (Italics original).

This author affirms that there is only one true meaning of any text of Scripture.[12] Missionaries must first discover the original meaning of Scripture through grammatical-historical hermeneutics.[13] The missionary must ensure that God's truth is expressed across cultures into a new context without losing, changing, or compromising its original textual meaning.[14] The missionary cannot alter God's Word to fit the context, but is charged with bringing all cultural expression under the definitional meaning and control of the Word of God.[15]

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12 Biblical conservatives rightly seek to find the single meaning of any given text of Scripture. Norman L. Geisler, *Summit II Hermeneutics: Understanding God's Word, A Commentary* (Oakland, California: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1983), 30. See also "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," With Commentary by Norman Geisler, http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago2. html, Article VII. Geisler states, "WE AFFIRM that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed." Also Article XVIII, stating, "WE AFFIRM that the Bible's own interpretation of itself is always correct, never deviating from, but rather elucidating, the single meaning of the inspired text. The single meaning of a prophet's words includes, but is not restricted to, the understanding of those words by the prophet and necessarily involves the intention of God evidenced in the fulfillment of those words."

13 See "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," with Commentary by Norman Geisler, Article XV. Geisler states, "*WE AFFIRM* the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text. *WE DENY* the legitimacy of any approach to Scripture that attributes to it meaning which the literal sense does not support."

14 To be clear, in this treatment the author is not necessarily focused on *translation* of Scripture into writing but rather is proposing an overall philosophy by which all attempts at cross-cultural missionary communication (written, spoken, illustrative, metaphorical application, graphics, music, art, etc.) may be brought under the concept of biblical contextualization, under the control of Scripture. For instance, in one situation witnessed by the author, a missionary attempted to represent Jesus to Buddhist people in Southeast Asia using a hand-drawn picture that closely resembled in all other cultural ways a Buddha, but with nail prints in the hands and a wound in its side. This would not be biblical contextualization because we have no warrant to misrepresent the Jesus of the Bible in the image of a Buddha. Such a misrepresentation would be syncretism. See "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html, Article XVIII stating, "*WE DENY* the legitimacy of any treatment of the text or quest for sources lying behind it that leads to relativizing, dehistoricizing, or discounting its teaching, or rejecting its claims to authorship." See "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," with Commentary by Norman Geisler, http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago2.html, Articles XI and XII. Article XI *affirms* that, "translations of the text of Scripture can communicate knowledge of God across all temporal and cultural boundaries," and it *denies* "that the meaning of biblical texts is so tied to the cultural out of which they came that understanding of the same meaning in other cultures is impossible." Article XII *affirms* "that in the task of translating the *Bible and teaching it in the context of each culture, only those functional equivalents which are faithful to the content of biblical teaching should be employed*" (emphasis added). Article XII *denies* "the legitimacy of methods which either are insensitive to the demands of cross-cultural communication *or distort biblical meaning in the process*" (emphasis added).

15 For example, Hadaway, *A Survey of World Missions*, 169. Hadaway warns that, "missiologists err when they suggest the god of Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism can be contextualized in the manner of the apostle Paul in Acts 17... identifying Krishna, Buddha, or Allah with the Unknown God presents problems because of these deities' questionable qualities." See also Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology*

In order to ensure no loss in biblical meaning when communicating cross-culturally, this author proposes a model, represented by an archer shooting an arrow at a target. The Archer Framework illustrates the interrelationships between God's Word, the missionary, and contextualization to the nations, displaying the necessary process in order to achieve biblical contextualization.
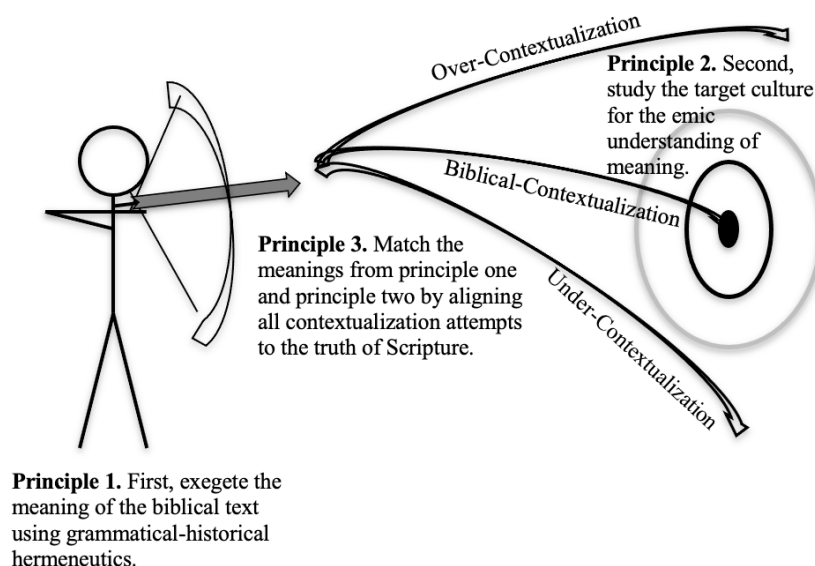

Figure 1: The Archer Framework

The process must begin with the meaning of the Word of God itself (Principle 1), consider how those meanings are *emically* communicated within the target culture (Principle 2), and then work to align the *emic* meaning to the biblical meaning so that God's truth is communicated into another context without compromise (Principle 3). The bow and the arrow represent God's truth in Scripture, either the whole of Scripture or any part, especially the gospel itself (Ps 119:160; John 17:17; Col 1:5). We cannot change God's truth, and yet it is something that must be sent out to all the nations (Matt 28:18–20; Luke 24:44–47). The missionary (represented by the archer) must communi-

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in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology (Grand Rapids,: Zondervan, 2007), 48. After a comparative analysis of the attributes of the God of the Bible and Allah of Islam, Tennent concludes, "we cannot help but recognize that those who follow the 'God of Muhammad' and those who follow the 'Father of Jesus' are in a state of profound discontinuity . . . I must conclude that the Father of Jesus is not the God of Muhammad."

cate God's unchanging truth (represented by the arrow) to a certain people (or language, or tribe, or tongue, represented by the target). The archer is an "ambassador with bow."[16] The target is not static but is ever-changing. The archer must be sure of his aim.

The distance between the missionary and the target nation (between the archer and the target) represents differences involving time, geography, worldview, culture, history, socio-economics, religion, politics, and language. All of these are elements that a missionary must navigate in order for the target nation to receive God's unchanging truth in a way they may understand it.

If the archer aims too high, he may miss the target. The upper flight path represents over-contextualization wherein errors of syncretism or various forms of Christo-paganism may result.[17] This approach goes beyond biblical contextualization, possibly forcing or twisting the biblical meaning to fit a cultural context thus losing the original meaning of the text.

The lower flight path represents under-contextualization, an aim that falls short of biblical contextualization. Communication will not be clear without enough consideration for the distance between God's eternal truth and the unreached nations of whom we must make disciples (Matt 28:18–20). If truth falls short when communicated, we will not make sense to them, and the message may not be received in a way that they can understand so that they may truly repent, believe in Jesus Christ, and be saved.

The arrow that hits the target represents a correctly aimed arrow that depends upon all necessary elements in the process. The missionary neither goes beyond what is written and revealed in Scripture (1 Cor 4:6), nor does he fall short of communicating the whole purpose of God to the receiving peoples (Acts 20:27). First, God's unchanging truth is discovered via exegesis and grammatical-historical hermeneutics. Second, aim, direction, and trajectory consider all concerns represented by the distance between the original meaning of the Word of God, the missionary's own culture, and the

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16   Cory Gonyo, "Establishing Principles for Biblical Contextualization With Specific Application in Theravada and Folk Buddhism of Southeast Asia," 242–245.

17   See Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 267. Hiebert states, "To say that there is no biblical worldview is also to say that conversion to Christ is essentially a change in behavior and rituals or of beliefs and attitudes. The history of missions shows us that conversion on these levels is not enough. If worldviews are not also converted, in time they distort the explicit message of the gospel and turn Christianity into Christo-paganism. The behavior and beliefs are Christian, but the underlying assumptions, categories, and logic are pagan."

emic meaning contextualized to any target nation today. Lastly, God's truth is communicated across the distance without any loss of original meaning in a way that the receiving culture understands that meaning and is able to know the truth of Scripture and correctly respond. Contextual meanings are made to align (through clear explanation, teaching, or defining) with God's unchanging truth.

The goal in missionary communication is that the eternal truth of God in Scripture (the arrow) impacts every nation, tribe, and tongue (the target) so that they may repent and receive Jesus as Lord and Savior and become His disciples. If any part of the Archer Framework is incomplete or otherwise left out, the arrow will simply not hit the target. It is an irreducible system, not only in archery, but also in cross-cultural communication of God's Word.

A missionary consistently operating in this way will engage in the cross-cultural communication process via a minimum of the three cultures involved; the Bible culture (the Kingdom of God revealed in Scripture, represented by the bow and arrow), his own culture (the archer who is the slave or ambassador of God's Kingdom), and the respondent culture (the nations, the target, contextualized meaning).[18] Only when the original meaning is discovered and maintained from the beginning to the end of the communication process will effective biblical contextualization take place. The missionary can anchor contextualization to the original meaning of the Scriptural text using the Archer Framework. God's Word remains the control in biblical contextualization, not the context of the receiving culture.

Conclusion: Testing Our Biblical Contextualization

The true test for the ministry of the Word must not be whether or not something is cultural (i.e., culturally relevant or appropriate) or practical (i.e., pragmatic or results-producing). The test must be whether or not something is true. Eckhard Schnabel writes:

Authentic biblical contextualization does not exploit a culture 'for the Church's own gain even as Christian faith is not about exploiting God for what we want.' . . . The utter uniqueness and holiness of the one true and

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18   See Paul Hiebert's bi-cultural community concept in Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, 231, and David Hesselgrave's Three-Culture Model of Missionary Communication Diagram in David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 108.

living God render all attempts to overhaul and retool the news of Jesus the Messiah and Savior to the preferences of secular or pagan audiences idolatrous … The one true and living God cannot be bought, he cannot be owned. Likewise, his Word cannot be bought.[19]

True biblical ministry is the powerful exaltation of the gospel and faithful preaching of the Word (2 Tim 4:1–4). The gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected is the all-sufficient power of God unto salvation for those who believe (1 Cor 1:18). Any manipulation of God's Word in an effort to improve upon results only undermines what we believe concerning the all-sufficiency of God's truth in Scripture holistically and the power of the gospel specifically. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, first for the Jew and then for the Greek (Rom 1:16). We must avoid all attempts at refashioning the gospel in our efforts to reach the nations. Only in Jesus Christ will anyone be saved from their sin, for indeed Jesus is the only Savior of the World (Act 4:12; John 4:42).

The truth of Jesus must be contextualized to every nation, tribe, and tongue. Yet the Jesus we communicate to the nations must remain the true Jesus, the all-Sovereign Lord of all peoples, the Son of God in eternal trinitarian fellowship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He must be the same Jesus before whom every nation, even every man, woman, and child must give an account (Rom 14:11; Phil 2:10). Anything less than the true Jesus and the truth of Scripture will not suffice. The Archer Framework serves as a guard against error and a guide so that God's unchanging truth is faithfully contextualized for every nation, tribe, and tongue.

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19 Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 449–450. Schnabel quotes Andrew F. Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 8; see also Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 156n1, recounting Allen's concern that ill-educated congregations will sell themselves to the highest bidder in order to garner grants from whichever mission is willing to give them the most.

The Power of Local and Global Missions

Strengthening the Heartbeat of the Church

Brandon Baca

In the dynamic landscape of church ministry, there exists a profound tension between the local community and the broader global context. As stewards of the gospel message, churches are called to balance their commitment to serving those in their immediate vicinity with a broader mission that extends to the farthest corners of the earth. Let's explore the importance of maintaining both a local and global mission emphasis within the church and outline practical steps to cultivate and sustain this vital balance.

The Importance of Local Mission

At the heart of every church lies a deep-rooted connection to its local community. The call to love our neighbors as ourselves permeates the fabric of our identity as followers of Jesus, compelling believers to engage meaningfully with the needs and challenges present in their own backyard. Local missions provide churches with a tangible opportunity to demonstrate the transformative power of Christ's love within their immediate sphere of influence.

Community Engagement

One practical next step for churches seeking to prioritize local missions is to actively engage with the needs of their surrounding community. This may involve partnering with local organizations, hosting community events, or launching outreach initiatives aimed at addressing issues such as homelessness, poverty, or food insecurity. By actively listening to the needs of their neighbors and responding with compassion and generosity, churches can become beacons of hope and healing in their local context.

I remember the first time I walked the streets of a neighborhood that many people said was unsafe. We began just by showing up door to door asking people how they were doing and asking a few questions about how to make the community even better. You would be surprised at the response! What we thought may be a 5–10-minute conversation lasted 30-45 minutes for some people. Each time we would end the conversations by asking how we could pray, and those moments were some of the most engaging moments as people began to open up and share. You would be surprised where these conversations would lead. We have had people share vulnerably, find hope, and even commit their lives to Jesus. When we love our neighbor and truly take time to listen, it is amazing how God uses these moments as tangible expressions of His love.

Luke 10:27 (NIV) - "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Relationship Building

Another crucial aspect of local missions is the cultivation of authentic relationships within the community. Building trust and rapport with local residents creates a foundation for meaningful ministry and enables churches to more effectively share the gospel message. Whether through mentorship programs, neighborhood gatherings, or service projects, investing in relationships fosters a sense of belonging and connectedness that transcends social barriers and fosters unity within the body of Christ.

One day while serving in the community, a gentleman asked if I would come and paint his house. He noticed that we were doing some minor home repair work in the neighborhood and wanted to see if he could get in on the action. Through a few conversations and some back and forth, I agreed to power wash his home to help him out. However, when I showed up at his house, I

had two power washers. One for me and one for him. I told him I would power wash his home, if he would do it with me. We have become great friends, and he even began to advocate and serve others in the neighborhood. One day he told me that something was happening to him, and he couldn't explain it. I quickly responded to let him know that I believed Jesus was changing his life. He agreed. Building relationships that are genuine opens the door, as we serve, to growth and transformation in us and others in our community.

1 John 4:11 (NIV) - "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

The Significance of Global Mission

While the call to love our neighbors begins at home, it does not end there. The gospel message is inherently global in its scope, reaching across cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries to proclaim the hope and salvation found in Jesus Christ. Global missions enable churches to participate in God's redemptive work on a global scale, partnering with believers around the world to advance the kingdom of God and fulfill the Great Commission.

Cross-Cultural Engagement

One practical next step for churches interested in global missions is to foster cross-cultural engagement and understanding within their congregations. This may involve supporting missionaries and mission organizations, hosting international guest speakers, or participating in cross-cultural exchange programs. By exposing believers to the diverse tapestry of God's kingdom, churches can broaden their perspectives and cultivate a heart for global missions.

Over many years of leading short term mission trips, I have learned to help individuals prepare for the context in which they will be serving. Many times, we think that God is at work only in our context and we are going to serve the poor who do not know Jesus. I remember one instance where we were serving in an East African context and the group began to learn what joy looks like in the midst of poverty. Many of the team had never worshiped like that before and returned home challenged by the way in which they saw God working around the world on another continent. God is at work around the world, and as we serve with Him and others globally it begins to challenge the way in which we serve him in our own backyard. Thinking globally can even sometimes help us engage missionally in a new and expanded way locally.

Revelation 7:9 (NIV) - "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

Strategic Partnerships

In addition to individual acts of service, churches can also leverage strategic partnerships to maximize their impact in global missions. Collaborating with established mission organizations, denominational agencies, or indigenous ministries allows churches to pool their resources, expertise, and networks to address complex global challenges. By strategically aligning their efforts with existing initiatives, churches can ensure that their global missions endeavors are both effective and sustainable.

We are truly better together. I am often amazed at how much more we can accomplish together as opposed to what we do on our own for the Kingdom of God. Once on a trip to Uganda, I was working with a local community pastor. We were praying about this vision that God had given him for his community. It was very apparent that the vision was bigger than any one person. So, God led us to have a community meeting and bring people together. Over the course of a few days, we began to see people, churches, governments, and organizations come together to bring clean water, church planting, education, and entrepreneurial opportunities to this community.

Today there is a thriving school, several churches have been planted, and the community has grown as a result of the way God used the local church as a catalyst for community transformation. This pastor has since moved to a new community and started the process over again establishing a growing network of church plants, community transformation efforts, and schools. It is amazing what God can do as we trust and follow him together.

This is the challenge for churches as we serve globally through strategic mission partnerships. Seek to serve alongside mission partners who are open to collaborative engagement locally. We are truly better together.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NIV) - "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up."

Practical Next Steps:

1. Conduct a Community Needs Assessment. Begin by identifying the most pressing needs within your local community and prayerfully discerning how your church can best address them.

2. Establish a Missions Volunteer Lead Team. Form a dedicated missions team tasked with overseeing and coordinating local and global missions initiatives within the church.

3. Develop a Missions Strategy. Craft a comprehensive missions strategy that outlines specific goals, objectives, and action plans for both local and global missions.

4. Cultivate Partnerships. Build relationships with local organizations, ministries, and churches to collaborate on mission projects and maximize impact.

5. Provide Training and Support. Equip volunteers and mission teams with the necessary training, resources, and support to effectively engage in local and global missions.

As the hands and feet of Christ in the world, the church is called to embody the transformative power of the gospel both locally and globally. By embracing a balanced mission emphasis that prioritizes both the needs of the local community and the broader global context, churches can fulfill their calling to be agents of love, reconciliation, and hope in a broken and hurting world. May we continually seek God's guidance and empowerment as we strive to fulfill the Great Commission and advance His kingdom on earth.


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RESOURCE REVIEWS

Barefoot, C.S. *Hermeneutical Community: Pursuing Local Theology in Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024

Jonathan Martyn, IMB personnel, Asia Pacific Rim

When missionaries plant a new church, how should these new believers do theology in ways that speak to their cultural context but are also faithful to Scripture? In this book, Barefoot explains that historically, two main challenges related to accomplishing this goal of local theology have been theological imposition and theological abandonment. In other words, on one extreme, missionaries directly imported their theology and dictated the theology of this new church, or on the other extreme, they left the new church alone to do theology on its own. In response to these two extremes, Barefoot recommends what he calls a "hermeneutical community for local theological development" and then provides insight on the role of outsiders (missionaries) in that community.
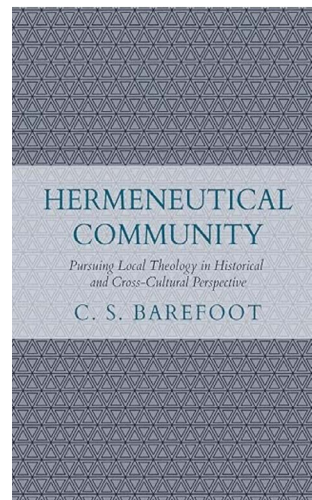
In addressing the role of the outsider in the hermeneutical community, he explains that one key issue is the need for the outsider to model sound hermeneutics. He writes, "Without acquiring a model for how to properly interpret the Bible, local believers remain susceptible to practicing a kind

of eisegesis in which their contextual preunderstandings remain the operative, determinative factor in theological development rather than biblical exegesis" (257). Walking alongside local believers from this newly planted church, an outsider modeling sound hermeneutics equips these believers to read Scripture and apply it to the key issues of their contexts.

Barefoot's work is a thorough, detailed examination of this critical topic. For each extreme, he devotes an entire chapter where he evaluates historical discussions and key examples that display the challenges of that extreme. Of course, the greatest strength of this work is that it proposes a balanced approach that avoids the extremes of imposition and abandonment, while also providing a helpful explanation of the role of the missionary in this process. One weakness, though, is that because this was Barefoot's dissertation, it is academic and may be difficult for some missionaries who are not accustomed to conceptual and theoretical discussions.

Despite this weakness, Barefoot's work holds significant value for missionaries. In recent years, a common debate among missionaries is that of church health versus church multiplication. If missionaries lean in one direction, they may be in danger of falling into the two extremes Barefoot examines, that of theological imposition or theological abandonment. This work provides valuable and much-needed insight into this debate by pointing missionaries forward.

In fact, the final chapter is a veritable goldmine of insights for missionaries involved in church planting and especially leadership development. For example, Barefoot shows that "parachute theological education," where educators only "drop in" to teach for a short period of time, is often ineffective in developing local theology since those educators are not aware of the issues the local church is facing. Additionally, he shows that an approach to leadership development or theological education that only focuses on content transfer is equally ineffective, since what ends up happening is the transfer of theological content that is not contextual.

In conclusion, Barefoot's book is a valuable contribution to missiological discussions related to contextualization, local theology, and hermeneutics. One challenge missionaries often face is how to come alongside local believers to address specific cultural norms and practices of that context. This book helpfully addresses that topic in a way that equips missionaries to think clearly about how to navigate those challenges. Barefoot's work also provides

critical insight into the church health versus church multiplication debate through its balanced proposal that guides missionaries in how they can aid local believers in developing theology that is both biblically sound and contextually relevant.

Menikoff, Aaron & Singh, Harshit. *Prioritizing Missions in the Church.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025.

Dean Polk, IMB Personnel, Central Asia

Everything that *Prioritizing Missions in the Church* teaches and urges is built on the conviction that, "only one institution in the world is called to steward the gospel message: the local church. Only the gospel has the power to save sinners from everlasting destruction...And that gospel is the stewardship of churches." (4). Menikoff and Singh don't merely argue for the truthfulness of this claim. They also offer positive, practical counsel to local churches about how they can become missions-centered.

The book's strength is its blend of principled argument with practical application. For example, the authors argue that "if a focus on taking the gospel abroad precedes applying the gospel at home, churches will not only be malnourished—they will wind up exporting principles and practices that hinder the spread of the gospel" (27). From this concern for the preservation of the gospel, the authors offer five questions churches should be able to respond positively to before sending out missionaries. The fourth of those, by way of example is, "Is depth as important to your church as breadth?" (38).

Later Menikoff and Singh write, "churches that faithfully teach Scripture will find their members longing for and laboring toward planting churches
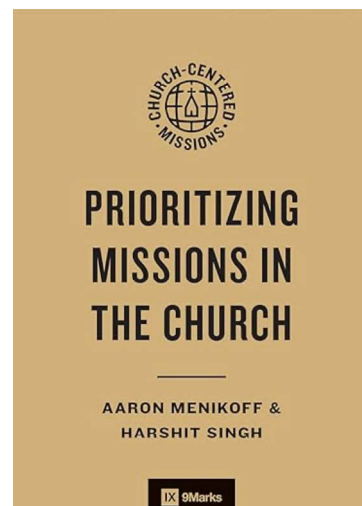
across the globe," (49) and they then go on to give a concise biblical theology of God's missions heart in all of Scripture. This concise treatment of the topic could serve as a practical tool for pastors seeking to lead their congregations well as they teach the Word week after week. In this section I was particularly helped to consider how the *Imago Dei* has a missions impulse—what the authors call our 'Stand and Show' function in the world. (51)

Operating from the conviction that healthy churches "identify men and women uniquely suited for cross-cultural work," (121) the authors offer 6 Loves (e.g., Love for hospitality) and 4 Questions (e.g., Are You Willing and Able to Do the Hard Work of Contextualization?) that local churches can use as filters to find qualified missionary candidates (125-146).

The authors also write, "God will use the regular rhythm of corporate worship to plant an impulse in regular church members to long for and labor toward the planting of churches across the globe" (85). From this conviction, they helpfully and practically tease out how the preaching, praying, and singing of local congregations will cultivate a missions passion among their members.

Very little in this monograph invites serious criticism. Given the chance, I would only want to make a small modification to Chapter 1 where Menikoff and Singh are burdened to point out that unhealthy churches tend to export unhealthy missionaries who carry unhealthy doctrine and practice with them where they go. In a broad sense, I heartily agree, but I would rush to say that many a not-yet-mature or fully healthy church has sent out excellent missionaries who have borne fruit to the glory of God, and themselves planted healthy churches in hard places.

In case the reader assumes that this book is mainly for church leaders in the West, please note that Singh pastors a church in an extraordinarily hostile environment in India. The wisdom of these pages is useful for those who labor in non-Western contexts. In fact, anywhere believers are working alongside nationals in the areas of leadership development or exit to partnership, I commend this work as resource to be consulted. In Central Asia, we are just beginning to see local churches consider their responsibility not only to receive missionaries but also send them. As these churches think about cooperating in the missions endeavor, I hope they will build churches and church associations on the strength of the ideas in this book.

Prioritizing Missions in the Church is the first in a new series from Crossway and 9 Marks titled, "Church Centered Missions." In the same way that 9 Marks' "Building Healthy Churches" series impacted ecclesiological thinking and practice throughout the world for good, I anticipate this new series will impact the practice and implementation of the missionary task throughout the world for good. Therefore, I commend the positive vision of this book with hope that it's a sign of good things to come in the series.

Kirk, Betsy. *Sacred Courage: Thinking Biblically About Fear and Anxiety.* **Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2025.**

Adaline Parker, IMB Personnel, Asia Pacific Rim

In many Christian circles, fear is often treated as a weakness to be conquered—or worse, a temptation to be ignored lest it lead us into sin. Yet in *Sacred Courage*, Betsy Kirk offers a refreshingly honest and profoundly hopeful alternative: not a denial of fear, but a transformation of it.

Drawing from her experiences as a missionary, Kirk weaves Scripture, story, and stunning prose to offer a deeply personal and artistic exploration of fear in the light of the sacred courage it calls forth. She affirms fear as a natural response to living in a broken, sin-stained world, yet she does not leave us there. Instead, she gently leads readers to see fear as an invitation: a call to surrender the fears that bind us and to step forward in obedient, Spirit-empowered courage. Alongside this, she invites us to rediscover a holy, life-giving fear of the Lord—the One who is both our refuge and our strength. Kirk reminds us that our heavenly Father is not repelled by our fear but receives it with gentleness, gathering us close in times of need. In this surrender, a profound freedom awaits: the freedom to live as we were created to—grounded not in self- reliance but in holy reverence and trust. This journey—of releasing
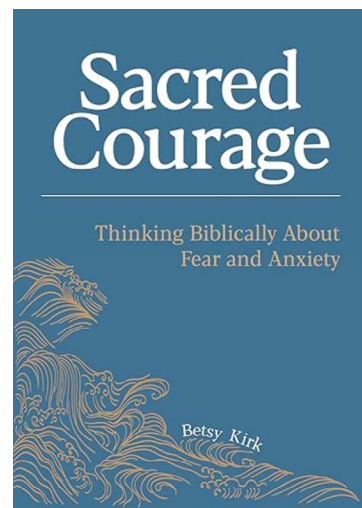
what weighs us down and embracing the fear that sets us free—is the heart of this beautiful, transformative book.

Kirk's vulnerability and spiritual insight create a safe, reflective space for readers to examine their own fears. With wisdom and grace, she calls readers not to flee or suppress their fear, but to face it—head-on and heart-open—because of the Cross. Through Christ's finished work, she reminds us, we are already victorious. Our courage, then, is not rooted in self-confidence but in the faithful presence of the One who goes before us and fights beside us.

What sets this book apart is its rare combination of theological richness, lyrical elegance, and deeply grounded practicality. Kirk skillfully bridges the gap between the abstract and the everyday, bringing concepts often confined to metaphor or academic discussion into tangible, lived experience. Each chapter pairs poetic insight with real-world application, guiding readers to not only reflect but also respond. With thoughtfully designed discussion questions and accessible wisdom, this book is a valuable tool for personal devotion, small group study, and church-wide discipleship. Missionaries, ministers, and laypeople alike will find it a profound and practical companion on the journey toward sacred courage.

In *Sacred Courage*, Kirk has given followers of Christ a rare gift: a call to courage that neither shames our fears nor glorifies our strength but magnifies the One in whom true courage is found.

Dunlop, Jamie. *Love the Ones Who Drive You Crazy: Eight Truths for Pursuing Unity in Your Church.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023

Preston Pearce, IMB Personnel, Europe

Jamie Dunlop wrote *Love the Ones Who Drive You Crazy* to help the reader love the people in their church whom they struggle to love because of their differences. Dunlop argues that the existence of disagreement in a church, rather than being a sign that something is wrong, indicates that "things have gone gloriously right" (22) because God shows his goodness and glory through unity in Christ despite differences. The differences Dunlop has in mind are not the major doctrinal kind that cause one to separate from his or her current church; rather, he writes about the many situations in which one is able to stay in the church despite differences in, e.g., culture, political views, and strongly held preferences and opinions.

Most of the book focuses on eight lessons Dunlop draws from Romans chapters 12-15:

- *Insistence on unity displays the glory of God: the purpose of the church is not to do things for God but to reflect his glory, and understanding this helps us seek God-honoring relationships with others.*

- *Impossible love flows from impossible mercy: grasping God's mercy for us takes us beyond obligation and changes our hearts toward others.*
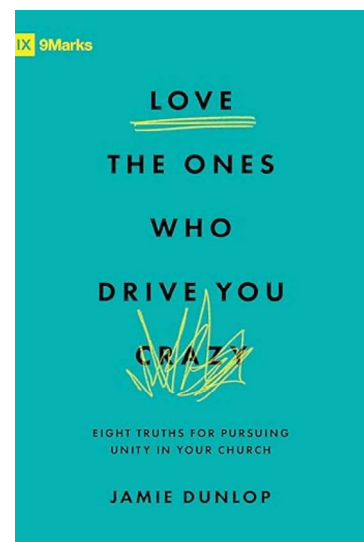
- *Disunity at church lies about Jesus: the greatest threat to the church is not some outside force but its ability to divide the church into warring camps.*

- *You belong together: we need to learn from the faith of those with whom we disagree and realize we belong to them and they to us.*

- *Hope in God creates affection for others: hope in Christ enables us to rejoice that God will be glorified in others' lives and ours, that they are growing into the likeness of Christ, as we are.*

- *Divine justice empowers full forgiveness: we must forgive and seek reconciliation and avoid bitterness and anger, and embrace the "injustice of forgiveness."*

- *People you dislike often act in faith: We must learn to see that others are motivated by sincere faith to act differently from us, so we should not look down on them.*

- *We will answer to God: our accountability to God changes our hearts toward others and moves us from despising into love.*

The book is very relevant to local church life and relationships in any culture, for virtually every church has some level of disagreement on secondary matters among members. Dunlop's emphasis on the glory of God as the purpose of the church is a helpful corrective to the consumer culture that is all too present in Western culture and churches. Though the biblical focus is Romans 12-15 (the practical portion of the epistle), this is not eight easy steps to unity, but a clear pointer to the ways the glory of God in the gospel serves as the foundation of unity despite real differences. Dunlop provides a clear gospel connection for each point he makes. The book is clearly written; most readers will find it easy to understand. Questions for reflection and discussion and prayer points at end of each chapter are helpful for personal reflection and group discussion. The book does reflect its American context in some of the specific issues mentioned, but the author is also intentional to draw some examples from non-North American situations.

This book is especially valuable for cross-cultural workers. In the churches with whom we partner (and even those "*perfect*" churches we ourselves plant), people have real differences that have the potential for misunderstanding, conflict, and division. Many of those differences do not rise to the level of separation, and we must find a way to serve alongside and submit to leaders of local churches. Even in the case of serious disagreements, looking together

humbly at the Scriptures allows us to understand one another better—and in God's timing, his word does its work and those disagreements are resolved or put in proper perspective so that the Lord may be glorified in the church's unity.